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THE TRUTH ABOUT VALVE'S SECRET STEAM CONSOLE

PLUS

- The race with Apple for games industry dominance
- Inside the next Portal
- Making a wearable computer
- **And the fate of Half-Life 3**

ALSO INSIDE

- WiiU TECH DISSECTED
- IS 343 KILLING HALO 4?
- BEYOND RESIDENT EVIL 6
- THE ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE
- THE MAKING OF MORTAL KOMBAT

BLACK OPS II

Insider details on the future of Call Of Duty

NEW GTA V DETAILS

Rockstar's multiplayer plans revealed


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A change is coming. Well, in reality it already has. Videogames are no longer the sole pursuit of the stereotypical gamer hidden in a darkened room while being yelled at to go outside and enjoy the sunshine.

Today, you're as likely to find an individual who has a passion for gaming on the commute to work as you are screaming through a headset on Xbox Live. In time, the traditional way in which we enjoy our pastime may even be nothing more than a memory. It's important, then, to be aware of and support such shifts, and that's why in this month's issue you may notice that some of the old rules have been done away with.

As gaming broadens its horizons so too has **games™**, casting its net further to reflect expanding tastes in videogames. Smartphone games, Facebook, Xbox Live Arcade and indie gaming are more important than ever, so **games™** will be right there to discover and present the finest of these and any games to you, the reader.

That doesn't mean we're steering clear of gaming's biggest warriors, though – far from it. We, as much as anyone else, get excited by the triple-A blockbuster experience, so our dedicated coverage of the biggest console titles remains here to stay.

As always, we'd love to hear your thoughts on the direction of **games™**, so don't be afraid to get in touch with us through any of our online channels.

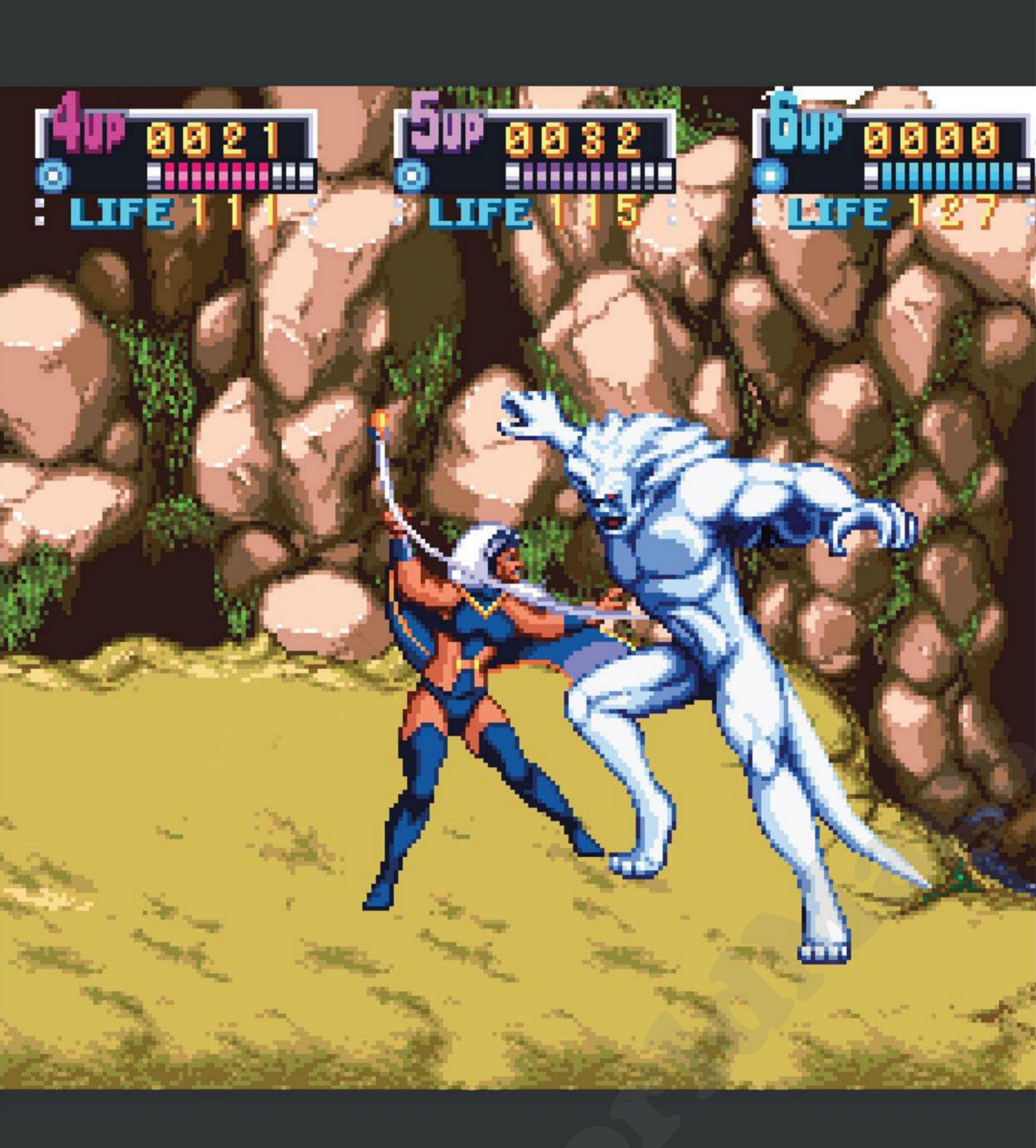
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Simon Miller
EDITOR




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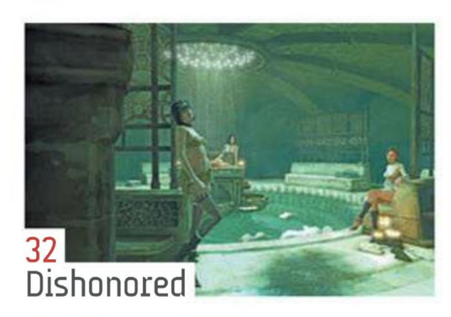
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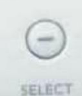

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TELL US WHAT YOU THINK OF WII U'S RE-REVEAL AT gamestm.co.uk/forum

(TOY STORY)

How Nintendo's new console will change gaming

→ Nintendo has become famous for embracing emerging technology and now, as details start to emerge on how the Wii U will use Near Field Communication, we assess its impact on familiar brands

It's hard to deny that Nintendo has always been one of the games industry's most innovative and successful developers because of its willingness to embrace emerging technologies. That trait has served it especially well during the last generation: the Wii pushed motion gaming to new heights and the 3DS, despite initial hiccups, has made glasses-free 3D gaming a mass-market reality. The early reveal of the Wii U at last year's E3 may have been a tactical misstep, but as the smoke clears it's looking like the Wii U's Near Field Communications technology in its tablet controller could be the Nintendo-led game-changer of the coming generation. Just like Wi-Fi or Bluetooth, Near Field Communication is a method for exchanging data between devices over short distances, and at Nintendo's investor conference in January, president Satoru Iwata announced it would be a core Wii U feature. "By installing this functionality," he claimed, "it will become possible to create cards and figurines that can electronically read and write data via non-contact NFC and to expand the new play format in the videogame world. Adoption of this functionality will enable various other possibilities such as using it as a means of making micropayments."

It's a statement filled with possibilities, not least a legion of *Skylanders*-style videogames that use its touch screen in conjunction with toys or collectable cards. While it's easy to latch on to fears that we could see a deluge of NFC-enabled junk hitting the shelves, or that publishers could start to break games down into hundreds of additional items they can make easy money with, it potentially isn't all doom and gloom. Nintendo isn't likely to flood the market with NFC toys for Wii U; such a move is counter-intuitive to its general approach. It's the third-party developers, particularly those with links to toy or collectable card companies, that could take that route – and even they are showing great imagination as to how NFC might be used, as shown by the recently leaked *Rayman Legends* video. There's massive potential for expanding the videogame experience on Wii U using NFC, including the creation of new types of gameplay mechanics. Join **games™** as we look at just how eight of the biggest franchises in games, and even some of our more traditional gaming pastimes, could potentially be changed forever by the advent of Near Field Communication-enhanced gaming.

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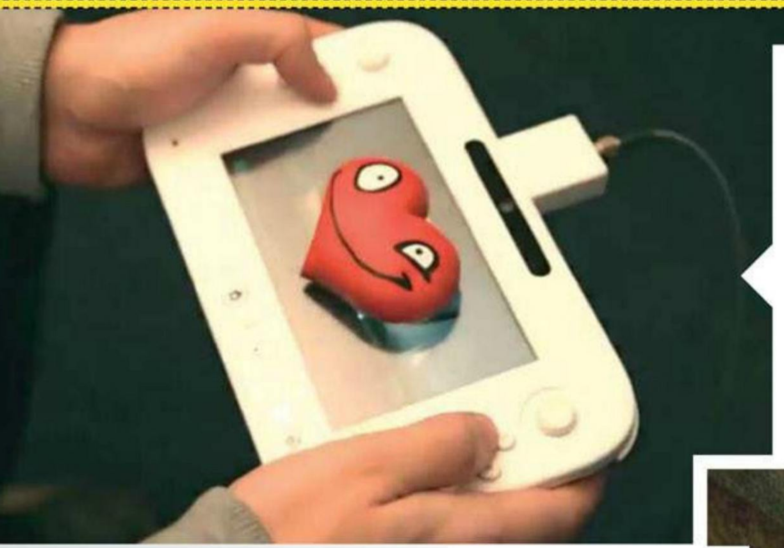
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Crossover gaming evolves

IT WAS *RAYMAN Legends* that gave us our first real glimpse of the Wii U's NFC technology in action. In a leaked video of *Rayman Legends*' platforming gameplay, we saw the theoretical potential of the Wii U brought to life as it reacted to objects placed on the tablet screen and translated them into in-game objects and actions. It showed a player in difficulty against enemies, placing a plastic heart on the screen, and that heart granting them an in-game health power-up. Later we saw a player using a Rabbid figurine on the screen, which popped a lunatic lapin into the game to interact with player characters. It's all very similar to how Activision's *Skylanders* figures interact with the in-game action, but far more dynamic. The end of the video teased a player using an Ezio figurine, opening the door for all kinds of exciting cross-game opportunities. "This video was intended as a purely internal demonstrative video, and in NO way represents the final game, the final console or their features," said Ubisoft in a statement trying to downplay the leak, but the cat is most definitely out of the bag.



DLC enters the physical realm

NO DEVELOPER HAS been as steadfast in its early support for the Wii U or seemingly believes in its potential more than Ubisoft. Its CEO, Yves Guillemot, underscored that speaking to Gamasutra last year, saying: "We feel this console is coming with very innovative features that will change the videogame industry and we want to be a part of that." With that sentiment it's hard to believe *Raving Rabbids* won't take advantage of the Wii U's NFC technology – with dozens of Rabbid collectables already out there, it's a perfect match. Most are expecting another minigame-style outing for the Rabbids, but it'd be easy to imagine Ubisoft developing *Trine*-inspired gameplay in *Raving Rabbids*. Each copy could come with a figure of a particular costumed Rabbid, with their own abilities as, say, a cowboy Bunny with a lasso, a strong man Bunny or Miner Bunny. With levels designed to be completed by all the Rabbid costumes, half the fun would be collecting other Rabbid types with which to tackle each zany world.



Smash Bros. gets more chaotic

WE ALL KNEW that as one of Nintendo's key franchises a *Smash Bros.* game would be in the works, but only since finishing *Kid Icarus: Uprising* has Masahiro Sakurai started talking about *Smash Bros.* on Wii U, telling **games™** in a recent interview: "There are many things that can be improved upon, even in *Brawl*." The *Smash Bros.* games always feature collectables, and it would be a natural fit for additional playable characters to be delivered via real-life figures.

Sakurai has always maintained that *Smash Bros.* should be a level playing field, saying: "As it is a game of a competitive nature, I do not think that any one person should have an advantage." That might rule out the player using the touch screen for power-ups, but we can see NFC models of universal power-ups such as the Smash Ball, or hazards that all characters have to avoid like tidal waves being randomly placed upon the touch screen to spice up *Super Smash Bros.'* already frantic battles.

...ISLAND GOVERNMENT FOR FIN... STAY SOLVENT





Card games enter the 21st century

WE'RE EXPECTING AN explosion of card and videogame hybrids on the Wii U thanks to how easy it is to embed NFC chips into anything, and the CCG gurus at Wizards Of The Coast must surely be rubbing their hands with glee at the Wii U's touch screen potential.

The company has already aggressively moved into videogames with the *Magic: The Gathering – Duels Of The Planeswalkers* series appearing on a number of formats, including 360 and iPad. Once again, the Wii U offers the potential to bring the real-life and videogame versions of *Magic: The Gathering* closer together by having all-new waves of the collectable cards sport NFC chips. The Wii U version of the game could easily come with a *Magic: The Gathering* starter pack as well as the game itself. It would mean that the player's experience could seamlessly move from the tabletop and school yard to the online realm, making the experience even more inclusive, addictive and probably expensive.

Lego bricks may change forever

DEVELOPED BY TRAVELLER'S Tales, and published by Nintendo as an exclusive on Wii U, *Lego City Stories* is a *GTA*-style open-world game set in a massive Lego world. Players will be able to run around a full-sized city, taking on a variety of crime-fighting missions and playing with Lego vehicles. Talking about playing *Lego City Stories* in an interview with *Official Nintendo Magazine*, TT Games director Arthur Parsons hinted: "Some of the things that are unannounced but are in the pipeline, when they're announced will get people really excited." One of those exciting new features could well be support for real Lego toys with NFC chips in them. It's easy, for example, to imagine buying a Lego Police Car kit, and upon building it and placing it on the Wii U have a police car dropped into the game and an increased police presence in the city – or even creating Lego buildings like hospitals or fire stations that have an NFC element. When scanned into the game, those buildings, and the services they provide, could appear, having a direct impact upon the gameplay and layout of the player's world and allowing the sort of personalisation that Lego is famed for.



Pokémon gets more collectible

A *POKÉMON* GAME is an obvious direction to look in when thinking about the potential of the Wii U's NFC technology on a Nintendo system, not least because of The Pokémon Company's previous experimentation with e-cards and ThinkChip toys. But the Wii U version of the game could also be directly linked to the *Pokémon* Trading Card Game. With NFC chips, say, built in to rare trading cards, players could chase the cards, then place their chosen Pokémon on the Wii U tablet and have them appear in the game in glorious 3D.

When you consider how Nintendo is promising to create a link between the Wii U and 3DS *Smash Bros.* games, it's not an inconceivable stretch to see it doing the same with *Pokémon*, creating a new, entirely joined card game/handheld/console experience for pocket monster fans.

> "Some of the things that are in the pipeline, when they're announced will get people really excited"
>
> Arthur Parsons, TT Games

→ BLIZZARD APOLOGISES TO DIABLO III PLAYERS FOR THE SERVER ISSUES AT LAUNCH



Spyro is finally fun again

WHEN GAMES™ SPOKE to Toys For Bob's Paul Reiche about the similarities between *Skylanders*' Portal Of Power and the Wii U, he quipped: "Our magic powers may be similar, but the power of the portal cannot be challenged." However, the Activision studio has a better understanding of this kind of technology in gaming than anyone else.

While Toys For Bob is remaining quiet as to whether a Wii U *Skylanders* game is in production, it's unlikely that Activision would miss this opportunity to expand its lucrative share of the toy-meets-game market – especially as sales of *Skylanders* toys generated $100 million in revenue for 2011. "This idea of videogame objects and characters coming to life is spreading, and we are going to be at the front end," said Reiche. "We are trying to stay well ahead of everybody." That more than hints at *Skylanders* appearing on Wii U, especially with the timely arrival of a new line of *Skylanders Giants* at the end of the year.



Tom Nook gets even richer

ONE OF MANY gamers' fondest parts of playing *Animal Crossing* is the ability to expand, customise and decorate their in-game house. *Animal Crossing* even uses concepts like feng shui to evaluate your decorative prowess. House customisation would no doubt be featured in a Wii U version, but it could take on an added dimension. It would be a logical step to create an *Animal Crossing* toy line with NFC chips in them that players could buy.

Small children could collect and play with the toys while their older siblings use the same items in-game on the Wii U for virtual play in *Animal Crossing*. *MySims* is another game that riffs on that idea with its furniture and clothing blueprints, and the NFC technology in the Wii U could easily be yet another way for traditional childhood play and pastimes to move organically into the digital realm.

XBOX 720 NFC TECH (predicted reveal June 2015)

Predicted Response: 40 MONTHS

PLAYSTATION 3 NFC PERIPHERAL (predicted reveal June 2013)

Predicted Response: 17 MONTHS

NEAR FIELD COMMUNICATION Wii U (revealed Jan 2012)

MICROSOFT JOULE (leaked June 2012)

Response time: 36 MONTHS

PLAYSTATION MOVE (revealed June 2009)

Response time: 45 MONTHS

HEART SENSOR TECHNOLOGY THE VITALITY SENSOR (shown Jun 2009)

MICROSOFT KINECT (revealed June 2009)

Response time: 45 MONTHS

SIXAXIS (revealed June 2006)

Response time: NINE MONTHS

MOTION CONTROLLED GAMING Wii (revealed Sep 2005)

PLAYSTATION DUALSHOCK (November 1997)

Response time: SEVEN MONTHS

FORCE FEEDBACK THE N64 RUMBLE PAK (April 1997)

PLAYSTATION DUAL ANALOG CONTROLLER (April 1997)

Response time: TEN MONTHS

ANALOGUE CONTROL THE N64 ANALOGUE STICK (June 1996)

Nintendo's hardware innovations are regularly adopted by the competition. So let's try to predict exactly when Microsoft and Sony will announce NFC use, if they choose to do so.

Will Sony and Microsoft adopt NFC in the next generation?


EA AND ACTIVISION SETTLE THEIR LEGAL DISPUTE OVER WEST & ZAMPELLA OUTSIDE OF COURT


5 things we've learned about Grand Theft Auto V

As Rockstar Games moves on from Max Payne 3, games™ looks at what this technically impressive new shooter reveals about its plans for GTA V, and speaks to the experts about what to expect from Rockstar's next adventure

1. ROCKSTAR WILL PRIORITISE STORY OVER GAMEPLAY

MAX PAYNE 3'S BRUTAL revenge drama narrative works on multiple levels.

While it's a fast-paced action game, its story is driven by the misguided actions of Payne and the characters around him. Surprisingly for an action game, its Brazilian setting lets Rockstar aesthetically explore a very different culture as Max uncovers the corruption of its divided society. Given how Rockstar has tried to create increasingly realistic protagonists for each new *GTA*, we expect *GTA V*'s lead character to drive its story. The franchise has always explored the darker side of American society in its fully realised open worlds, something suggested by the level of detail in the *GTA V* trailer, which also hinted that the current financial crisis could be its narrative backdrop. "When we saw the trailer we were excited," admits Jeff O'Connell, Senior Producer on United Front Games' open-world crime drama *Sleeping Dogs*. "They're going to innovate and make everyone raise their game."

2. MAX PAYNE PLAYERS WILL CONTINUE THEIR FIGHT IN GTA

ROCKSTAR LEARNED a new set of skills in order to create *Max Payne 3*'s arena-based multiplayer. "I think the main difference here was all the energy and creativity that we normally pour into our open worlds was distilled into these very tight levels and shooter mechanics," explains multiplayer designer Charlie Bewsher. That learning translated into some unusual modes, like Gang Wars, which sees players battle through objective-based rounds before finishing with a Deathmatch – an idea that would translate fairly easily into a *GTA*-style open world. But we already know *GTA V*'s multiplayer will enable players to import their *Max Payne* Clans or Crews into *GTA V*, offering a sense of continuity, something increasingly important online. "With our Crew features, the feuds and rivalries players create in *Max Payne 3* can be transferred over into *GTA V* and beyond," says Bewsher. "We've got big plans for future Rockstar releases."

DATA STREAM → THQ DROPS TOMONOBU ITAGAKI'S ACTION GAME DEVIL'S THIRD, SEEKS NEW PUBLISHER



TELL US WHAT YOU EXPECT FROM GRAND THEFT AUTO V AT gamestm.co.uk/forum

3. COMBAT WILL ACTUALLY BE FUN THIS TIME

■ IN *MAX PAYNE 3*, Rockstar shows it finally understands how to create dynamic third-person shooter combat, and according to Rockstar's lead multiplayer designer, Charlie Bewsher, that's a huge part of its appeal. "I think so much of what makes *Max Payne 3* feel fresh simply comes from the core game, in that it's a state-of-the-art shooter, with incredible movement mechanics, Bullet Time and Max's unique gritty feel."

Having polished *Max Payne 3*'s shooting and cover mechanic to near perfection it's hard to imagine Rockstar won't bring what it has learnt to *GTA V*. Despite an attempt to improve it in *GTA IV*, the third-person shooting in the series has always been a weakness. Cleverly adapting and using elements of *Max Payne 3*'s hard-hitting shooting and fluid cover system will finally bring the series gunplay up to a par with its excellent driving and open world mechanics.

■ The revamped Rockstar Games Social Club will form the heart of the online experience in both Max Payne 3 and GTA V.

4. IT'LL BE SUPPORTED BY A POWERFUL SOCIAL NETWORK

■ ROCKSTAR RECENTLY announced it was updating Rockstar Games Social Club, the online social network for all its titles. As well as supporting achievements and stat tracking for Rockstar games it will now include personal user profiles, an all new Friends system with public and private messaging, and links to social media like Facebook and Twitter. Starting with *Max Payne 3* it now supports SocialClubCREWS, the *Max Payne 3* equivalent of player Clans. With those Clans already confirmed to be carried over to *GTA V*, it's clear that the Rockstar Games Social Club will be at the heart of the *GTA V* experience, as players not only show off their achievements but also communicate and organise their gaming experience on the service.

5. IT MAY WELL BE THE BEST LOOKING GAME OF THE GENERATION

■ ROCKSTAR GAMES has constantly tweaked and enhanced the RAGE Engine to match the ever-growing requirements of its games, and *Max Payne 3* shows it at its most impressive. "We ramped up everything for *Max Payne 3*," said Rockstar Art Director Rob Nelson speaking in an interview with IGN.

"We're using literally thousands of custom animations alongside with Natural Motion's Euphoria system so that Max moves realistically in Bullet Time and real time." That has a particular impact upon player immersion in *Max Payne 3*, as you really feel thrown into the heart of combat. There's also a spectacular amount of detail in *Max Payne 3*'s environments, and easily one of Rockstar's finest games to date on a visual level.

The developer has always used a better version of the engine for each *GTA* instalment and, while it might not be able to get quite the same level of detail into an open-world game, the *GTA V* trailer suggests it'll push the engine to new heights.

GTA V VERSUS BLACK OPS II



■ THE PROSPECT of huge competitive focused play in a *GTA V* suggested by Rockstar's approach to *Max Payne 3* is exciting, but there's no guarantee of its success in the competitive online multiplayer landscape – especially as dominated as it is by *Call Of Duty*. "There haven't been very many hugely successful third-person multiplayer games," says industry analyst Michael Pachter. "*Gears Of War* is the only one that comes to mind that has really had any success. I think it's possible, but it's unlikely that *GTA* multiplayer will ever be mentioned favourably when compared to *Call Of Duty* multiplayer."

➔ SQUARE ENIX'S TOMB RAIDER REBOOT HAS DROPPED BACK TO 2013







(THE NEXT BITE)

Game on for Apple?

→ As Apple continues to tighten its grip on the handheld market, **games™** asks whether our TV screens will be next

WHILE VALVE recently debunked the rumour that Apple's Tim Cook visited the company for talks about developing a joint Steam and Apple product, it's easy to see just why it caused such furore. Since the 2007 debut of the iPhone, Apple has had a huge impact on the gaming industry; the boom in mobile apps has irrevocably changed the gaming landscape as its share of the portable market has tripled from 20 per cent in 2009 to 60 per cent in 2011. It's seen traditional portable giants Nintendo and Sony shunted into second and third place in the market, with little indication they can recover.

It's easy to be distracted by the big events like the expected release of the iPhone 5 and iOS 6 this year. If the current crop of rumours prove to be true, then the iPhone 5 will not only be more powerful than the current unit, but will also sport a bigger screen and possibly universal Bluetooth controller support, features that will allow for more complex iOS games. If developers get their collective wish then iOS 6 will enable iOS platforms to run more graphically intensive games.

> "If Apple TV becomes accepted, playing iOS or Mac games in living rooms could become the norm"

But Apple products are about more than just hardware, and it's the continuing evolution of Game Center – Apple's Xbox Live-style gaming network – that may prove to be the company's gateway from handhelds to the console space. While Mac gaming has been vastly improved by the launch of Steam on OS X and the Mac's own App Store, the release of OS X Mountain Lion this summer will bring Game Center to Mac, and promises to really open up the platform as the hub of an Apple gaming network.

Game Center – as well as the forthcoming ability to stream content from

→ ROVIO ANNOUNCES THAT ITS ANGRY BIRDS GAMES HAVE BEEN DOWNLOADED MORE THAN ONE BILLION TIMES



(THE MOUNTING EVIDENCE)

→ Five clues that Apple is aiming beyond iOS and Mac and towards the console market



GAME CENTER

GAME CENTER'S move from iOS to Mac this summer brings Apple's Xbox Live-style network to yet another platform, and enables iPhone and iPad gamers to be play across the net with or against Mac owners. Expect development support for Mac to flourish further as a result.

STEAM/MAC APP STORE



THE INTRODUCTION of Steam and the Mac's App Store have seen a massive rise in development support for the platform, making it more of a games machine than ever before. Big games like *The Elder Scrolls Online* are increasingly being announced for Mac at the same time as PC – something unheard of in previous generations.



CHOMP

A POOR search engine is arguably the App Store's biggest weakness, but Apple acquired a top-tier search engine company called Chomp for $50 million in February to lead an upcoming revamp of the service. Chomp's proprietary search algorithm will make Apple platforms much more usable.

OS X 'MOUNTAIN LION'



ANNOUNCED IN February 2012 and slated for a summer release OS X Mountain Lion is not only bringing many of Apple's game-supporting iOS innovations like Game Center and deeper iCloud integration to Macs but will also, crucially, enable any Mac software to be streamed to a TV set through Apple TV. The Apple console is essentially here this summer.



APPLE TV

AS ALL Mac and iOS content can now be streamed to a TV screen through Apple TV, the significance of Apple's media streaming device continues to grow. How long before Apple TV allows Apps to be purchased and played without the need to own a separate Mac or iOS device?

Mac to a television, via Apple TV – is being applied to gaming content for the first time in Mountain Lion. This will not only allow cross-platform gaming on all Apple products, but the prospect of deeper iOS games using the more powerful Mac as their basis.

Just as importantly, this sort of networked gaming could make the idea of single platform consoles seem increasingly obsolete. Thanks to the 'halo effect' – in which the popularity of the iPhone, iPod and iPad is said to filter back into the Mac market, Apple's desktop computers continue to enjoy a surge in usage; if Apple TV becomes widely accepted, playing iOS or Mac games in living rooms on the big screen could feasibly become the norm in the future.

But the biggest challenge to traditional gaming could arguably come from a different sector of the iOS gaming model. Unlike console development, you don't need vast sums of money to ensure a big iOS hit, just good ideas – which partly explains the iOS indie explosion. And the line between content creator and consumer is increasingly blurred. On mobile, this new gaming democracy has revolutionised the market. Just think what it will do when it hits our TV screens. If Sony and Nintendo are worried now, you can bet they're going to be terrified in years to come.



SPEAKERS' CORNER

"More and more people come to me at Ubisoft and say, 'I love games. I came into this industry with so many ideas. But I can't continue to make shooters over and over again.' I have that meeting a lot these days… it's time to give our teenage medium a kick in the balls."
Jade Raymond expresses her frustration with the stilted maturity of the industry in what clearly seems an appropriate way.

"Part of me is somewhat disappointed with every game. But I am insanely proud of all of them and especially of the people I have worked with."
Peter Molyneux reflects on his time at Microsoft, and sounds like a doting father.

"I'm totally opposed to blocking used games. I think it's great for the consumer that they can buy those. We have a customer that buys our console late in the cycle, pays less, is looking for value-priced games, and I think it would be anti-consumer for us to do that."
Sony's Jack Tretton hints that PlayStation 4 will not block the use of used games after all.

"You need friends. It's just the way life works. It turned out we were able to convince retailers and publishers like Activision, Electronic Arts and others, that it was a good thing for Microsoft to be successful, because if we were not successful, the only game in town was Sony."
Former Xbox exec Robbie Bach explains why fear is such a great motivator in publishing.

"The fact that *Vanquish* didn't have a multiplayer suite was a crime. My advice to Japan is that in a disc-based market right now, you cannot [ignore multiplayer]."
Cliff Bleszinski on why *Vanquish* bombed, as he exhorts Japanese developers to include focused multiplayer in all console games.

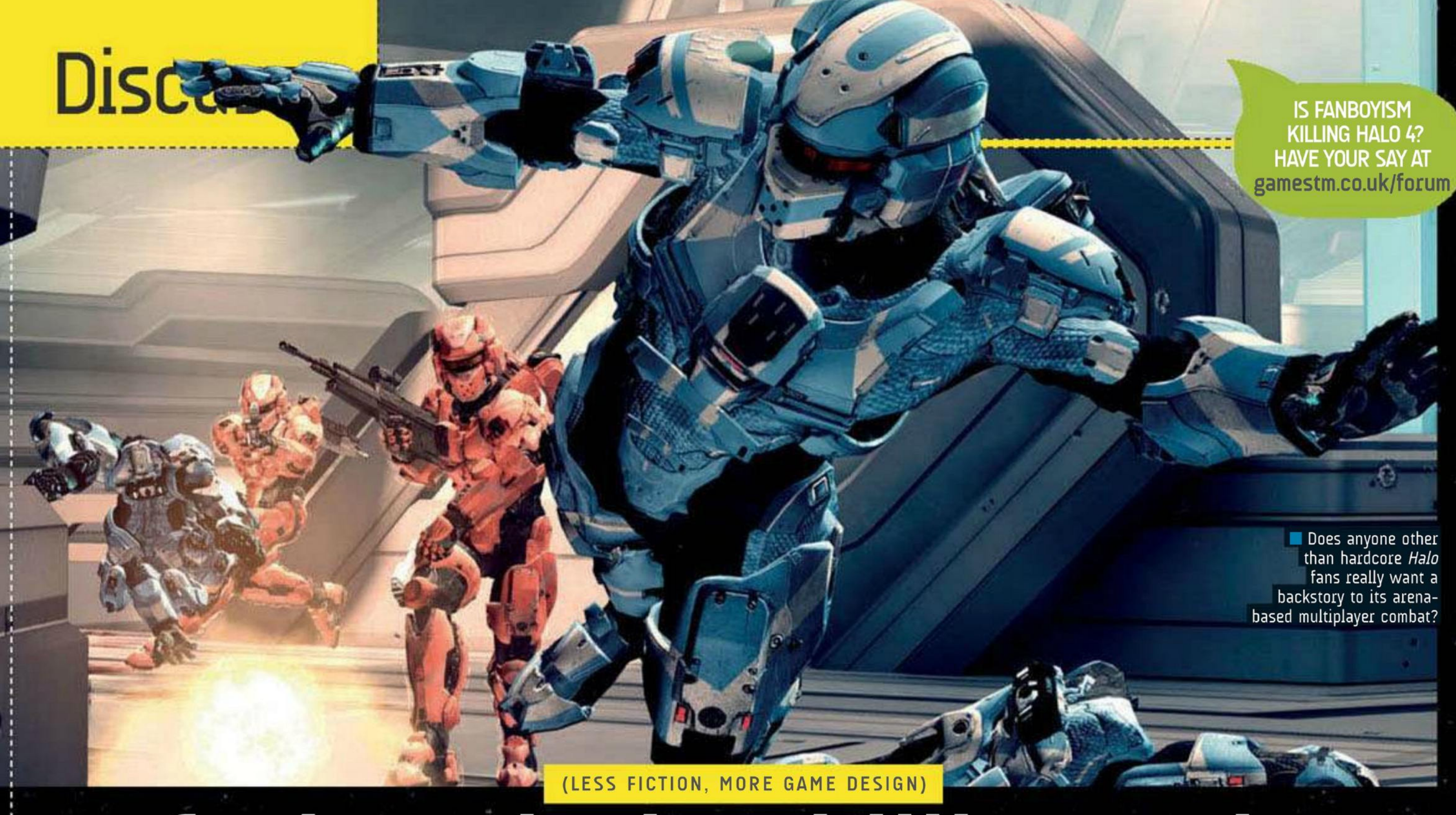
"Adventure games are like good wine. It's like, high-end, quality stuff that people who understand it want it to be sophisticated. And that's a struggle."
Telltale CEO Dan Connors illustrates why it's impossible to please everyone all the time.

"The difficulty that we face is protecting the taxpayers and looking ahead to the future [to determine] whether there's viability that's worth further investment."
Governor of Rhode Island Lincoln Chafee is on the fence on the subject of whether to bail out 38 Studios or not.

"The reach of his bad leadership has extended far beyond Microsoft when it comes to destroying shareholder value – and jobs."
Forbes nominates Steve Ballmer as the CEO who most deserves to be fired.

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→ BLIZZARD AND VALVE AMICABLY SETTLE THEIR LONG-RUNNING DISPUTE OVER THE DOTA TRADEMARK



IS FANBOYISM KILLING HALO 4? HAVE YOUR SAY AT gamestm.co.uk/forum

Does anyone other than hardcore *Halo* fans really want a backstory to its arena-based multiplayer combat?

(LESS FICTION, MORE GAME DESIGN)

Is fanboy design killing Halo 4?

→ With Halo 4 looming ever closer, **games™** asks whether 343 Industries has its priorities right

No one cares more about a blockbuster game franchise than its fans, and that includes its development team. Indeed, as time goes by, increasing numbers of gamers are becoming developers working on the next iterations of their beloved franchises, and it's interesting how those fans cope with the challenge of bringing their vision to an established series.

343 Industries is increasingly looking like a poster child for that concept. It comprises a handful of developers previously from franchise creator Bungie and a team who, according to the mantra of 343 interviews, joined because of a deep love of *Halo*. "The team's been really excited about having this opportunity to take on a franchise that they love and try to bring a new set of eyes and a new creative vision to *Halo*," says *Halo 4* executive producer Kiki Wolfkill. But love alone isn't enough to make a great game.

This begs the question: just how far can that new creative vision go in a franchise like *Halo*? 343 Industries has always acknowledged that protecting the core *Halo* experience while injecting the franchise with new life isn't easy. It's a creative tension that forced *Metal Gear Solid 4* producer Ryan Payton to leave the project last year, saying, "The *Halo* I wanted to build was fundamentally different, and I don't think I had built enough credibility to see such a crazy endeavour through."

"RIGHT FROM THE get-go we had a team that really understood that '30 seconds of fun' and everything else that defines *Halo*," says Wolfkill, "but the bigger challenge was gaining the confidence to allow us to deviate from where *Halo* has been." Whether or not 343 has brought sufficient meaningful change to the core *Halo* formula for it to stand out enough in the current FPS market is a question worth asking, especially given the high level of competition it'll face.

> "The bigger challenge was gaining the confidence to allow us to deviate from where Halo has been"
> Kiki Wolfkill, 343 Industries

There are a number of new elements in *Halo 4*, and they fall into two distinct camps. The first are practical attempts by 343 to modernise the franchise. They include an update of the *Halo: Reach* engine to enable the more graphically detailed *Halo 4* to run at a native 720p (the series has been in need of a visual overhaul for quite some time), the inclusion of a *COD*-inspired player progression system in multiplayer, a balancing out of the armour abilities introduced in *Halo: Reach*, and the inclusion of an all-new co-op mode called Spartan Ops. They're all good elements, but it's hard to shake the feeling *Halo* is just playing catch-up with the shooter pack.

The second set of changes is more creative but arguably just as cosmetic. What's hard to gauge is how much impact they'll have on those who aren't *Halo* fans. 343 is focusing more upon Master Chief as a character in the Campaign, re-designing his armour and attempting to delve even deeper

→ THE AUSTRALIAN WING OF GAME FOLLOWS ITS UK COUNTERPART INTO ADMINISTRATION, STORES REMAIN OPEN

into the convoluted *Halo* mythos. Multiplayer is being reinvigorated within the *Halo* fiction by setting it upon a UNSC starship called Infinity, with player Spartans battling each other in holographic training exercises called War Games – and they'll be able to use persistent characters from that setting in Spartan Ops mode.

INDEED, EVERYTHING NEW 343 is doing is tied to the *Halo* fiction rather than its gameplay, which is apparently getting no major additions. Looking at what's being done, it seems 343 is being forced to tinker at the edges of the *Halo* franchise. Does 343's reverence mean it will indulge in the fiction at the expense of gameplay innovation? Speaking to *Game Informer*, Frank O'Connor seemed to confirm the game's narrative focus, saying, "Story is funny because I've been thinking about where the *Halo* story goes for [the next] ten years. And even as a fan, I wonder, 'What's gonna happen next?'"

It's important for 343 to appeal to *Halo* fans, but ultimately there's the question of wider appeal. It's hard not to wonder whether without any real change to its core mechanics, and such an emphasis upon the series' tangled, perfunctory fiction, whether 343's efforts will be quite as appreciated by non-fans or whether it'll be able to impress the FPS market. If you've no burning interest in *Halo*'s space opera narrative, is there really enough here to hook you into *Halo 4*?

As another iteration on a familiar formula, the burden of appealing to new players will fall on *Halo 4*'s gameplay. That's the reason the first game defined the Xbox generation, not because of its story and certainly despite its characters. Let's hope someone at 343 realises that.

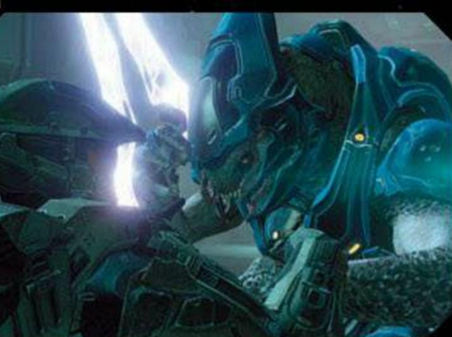
Read 'em and weep

Halo has always had a story, but as the franchise has evolved that narrative has grown to dominate the series. And as *Halo 4* readies its launch, it risks spilling far too much of its niche, and frankly tiresome, expanded universe into the game…



Halo 4: Forward Unto Dawn

■ In November, just before *Halo 4* launches, Microsoft is debuting a web-based live-action animation series set in the *Halo* universe called *Halo 4: Forward Unto Dawn*. Released in 15-minute weekly instalments, it will tell the tale of the Master Chief's adventures with a UNSC cadet who later becomes a leader on the UNSC Infinity, the fictional setting for *Halo 4*'s multiplayer. 343 Industries sees it as a way of easing new players into the fiction and giving them a background to the story of *Halo 4*.



War Games and Spartan Ops

■ *Halo 4*'s multiplayer will get a narrative context for the first time, with player battles set upon the UNSC Infinity as training exercises called War Games, and used in Spec Ops co-op missions, which will be released as weekly episodic content. "The Spartan that you create within Infinity, that you use in the competitive multiplayer in War Games, is the same Spartan you carry over into Spartan Ops," promises 343 producer Kiki Wolfkill.



The Halo Expanded Universe books

■ For fans that want to really dig into the fiction, Greg Bear's *Forerunner Saga* novels cover the origin of *Halo 4*'s new antagonists The Forerunners, while Karen Traviss' novels *Glasslands* and *The Thursday War* will fill in the gaps between *Halo 3* and *4*. In November, Titan books is also releasing *Awakening: The Art Of Halo 4*, which shows off the game's beautiful concept art.



SONY SHARES DROP SEVEN PER CENT TO A 32-YEAR LOW FOLLOWING A $5.74 BILLION ANNUAL LOSS



#TRENDING

with NowGamer.com's Nick Jones



Why Elder Scrolls Online has already failed, and I haven't even seen it yet



The subscription-based MMO is dying. What with *World Of Warcraft*'s dwindling subscriber base and with reports of near-empty *SWTOR* servers and falling player numbers, the game is nearly up for pay-as-you-play online gaming.

The move to free-to-play is a seemingly inevitable one, you'd think: just in the last year, big hitters such as *DC Universe*, *The Lord Of The Rings* and *Star Trek* have all been forced to adopt the model.

And yet, as often happens with tired, old genres, there's an opportunity for someone to come along, reinvent and reboot – as *World Of Warcraft* did in 2004 – and make an absolute mint. To do that, though, this rebooted MMO would have to appeal to more than just the hardcore RPG-er, just as *WOW* managed to do all those years ago.

2011's biggest game was *Skyrim*. I know this not because of sales figures or internet memes or, God forbid, review scores, but because *Skyrim* was the game singularly responsible for the most traffic on **NowGamer.com** last year; in traffic terms *Skyrim* stood head and shoulders above *Battlefield*, *Batman* and even the mighty *Modern Warfare 3*.

So imagine my excitement, as editor of a site that had just benefited from massive *Elder Scrolls* traffic, when I heard another *Elder Scrolls* game was coming and coming soon. Ker-ching, indeed.

And then the internet showed us what it looked like.

Elder Scrolls Online was not *Skyrim* or *Oblivion* (or even *Morrowind*, for that matter) in MMO form, it was actually *Runes Of Magic* or *Rift* or one of the other countless *World Of Warcraft* clones, with brightly-coloured magical things, some boundary-shy visuals, oh, and a series-busting perspective: third-person.

> Imagine a Whiterun populated by real people, where each house is owned by a player, with an economy that works in real time

To my mind, *Skyrim* shows the way forward for MMOs: it's a lush, modern and sexy take on the RPG, that makes role-playing games relevant in an era dominated by boys playing at army. Part of its appeal, for me, is that it's played in first-person; that it uses the modern shooter's favourite camera angle to plant the player firmly in its fantasy world, to live a life through the eyes of a Dragonborn.

The other key thing for me is that the characters that inhabit *Skyrim* and the world of Skyrim itself are believable; they act and behave like they have a place in the real world. Skyrim is not a world of giant mushrooms and fluorescent floating castles. Take away the dragons and magic and you could be walking in the Lake District.

The land of Skyrim is definitely more Westeros than Azeroth.

Any MMO game that's going to shake things up will also, most likely, need to be attached to an existing and popular universe. EA knew this with *SWTOR*, and here's why *Skyrim*'s success is a major boon for any *Elder Scrolls* MMO.

Those 10 million-odd sales are about as good as marketing gets: 'Hey, you know that RPG you loved and spent hundreds of hours playing and still talk about now six months after you finished it? Well, now it's ten times bigger and better and you can play it with your mates!'

Here, take my money. Take all of my money.

Imagine a Whiterun populated by real people, where each house is owned by a player, with an economy that works in real time. Imagine taking part in (or even just witnessing) massive pitched battles between the Stormcloak and Imperial armies. Imagine a game world so large and so dense that it encompasses all of the countries of Tamriel in same level of detail as *Skyrim*.

That is an MMO I would play.

In case you hadn't worked it out yet, I'm speaking as a person who doesn't play MMOs. Sure, I've dabbled in the genre but I've never really felt that it's for me. *Skyrim*, on the other hand, is something I get.

But then, isn't that the point? *WOW*'s downward trend shows the average MMO player has had his fill of pay-to-play gaming. *SWTOR*, in spite of a bankable licence and developer, shows that the genre cannot rely on staple MMO design anymore.

Of course, it remains to be seen exactly what *The Elder Scrolls Online* will entail. I'm basing all this entirely on a handful of screenshots, so I'm probably going to have to eat my words when Zenimax creates the biggest-grossing MMO of all time. But still, the sentiment remains: if the MMO wasn't thought of as a genre but actually a way of simply describing how a game connects, it could be so much more to many more people.

The MMO needs to move on artistically and technologically; *The Elder Scrolls Online* was (and remains) the perfect opportunity to do that. I just hope that the opportunity is taken.

Nick Jones is Editor in Chief of



As Epic Games fully reveals the capabilities of Unreal Engine 4 after nearly ten years in development, games™ readers share their thoughts on the next generation of game visuals

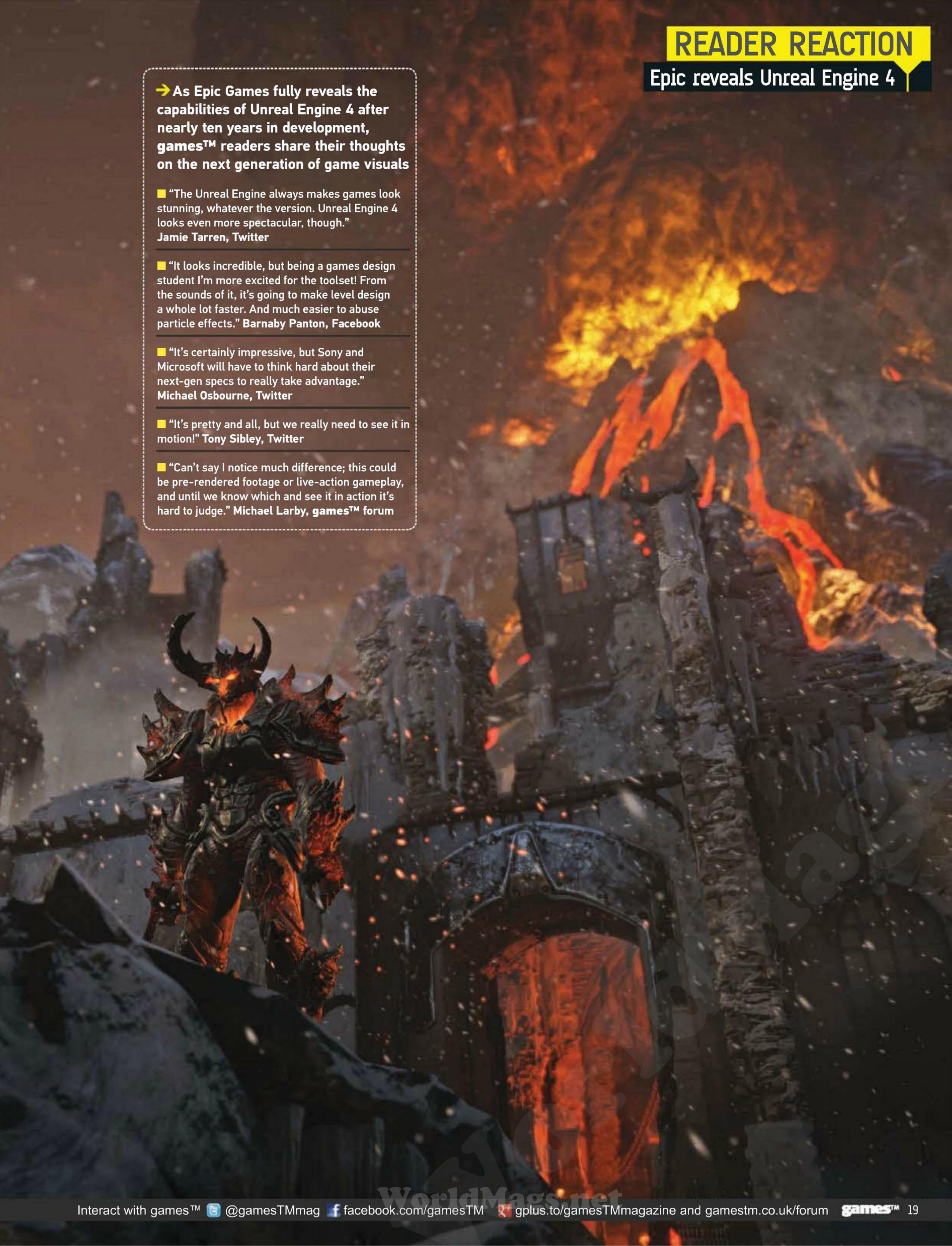
- "The Unreal Engine always makes games look stunning, whatever the version. Unreal Engine 4 looks even more spectacular, though."
Jamie Tarren, Twitter

- "It looks incredible, but being a games design student I'm more excited for the toolset! From the sounds of it, it's going to make level design a whole lot faster. And much easier to abuse particle effects." **Barnaby Panton, Facebook**

- "It's certainly impressive, but Sony and Microsoft will have to think hard about their next-gen specs to really take advantage."
Michael Osbourne, Twitter

- "It's pretty and all, but we really need to see it in motion!" **Tony Sibley, Twitter**

- "Can't say I notice much difference; this could be pre-rendered footage or live-action gameplay, and until we know which and see it in action it's hard to judge." **Michael Larby, games™ forum**





GAME DEV STORY

with Q Entertainment's James Mielke

Japan's most prominent videogame store district is dead



The first time I ever visited Tokyo's legendary Akihabara district was for a media tour with Squaresoft back in February 2000. It was a cold winter, but among the pitstops made during that stay in Tokyo was a visit to the Pokémon Center, followed by a train ride out to Akihabara. I was lucky enough to make this trip during the last, pure days of videogaming. This was before today's gamers came to expect things like social networking, online marketplaces, wireless broadband connectivity, built-in hard drives and all the other hoo-ha that comes packed in consoles these days. Sure, the just-released PlayStation 2 came equipped with a DVD player (a feature which would help the PS2 dominate that era of gaming), but we still pretty much all bought gaming consoles to play games; and not sit around and watch Hulu and Netflix all day.

This trip took place during the peak of the Dreamcast era – one of my favourite gaming systems – and stores up and down Akihabara's main thoroughfare were overflowing with all the newest, Japan-only games, and nearly every shop carried to some extent a selection of older, used, and more often than not, classic games. It wasn't difficult to buy a brand new copy of *Frame Gride* for Dreamcast along with a second-hand, mint-condition copy of *Rent-A-Hero No. 1* for Mega Drive. These were still the halcyon days of gaming, and the dream would live on up until the peak of the GameCube's lifespan. I recall the tangible thrill of successfully combing through Akihabara's many shops in search of the difficult to find ASCII controller/keyboard, for use with *Phantasy Star Online*; not just for myself, but also for the boys back home who paid me to acquire one for them.

But after a couple more years and a dozen more trips to Japan (media trips, Tokyo Game Show, et cetera), the lustre had begun to wear off. I wondered if it was because it was just becoming familiar, or if Akihabara was changing. Ultimately, I began to realise it was a combination of things. The biggest factor in Akihabara's decline is undoubtedly the emergence of online marketplaces like Yahoo Auctions, Amazon Japan, Rakuten, and then of course, digital distribution. Rakuten, et al, made trekking out to Akihabara irrelevant when you could more easily do an auction search for whatever games you wanted, with none of the legwork. Of course, this is only helpful to people who live in Japan, but digital distribution (and HD remakes) played its part, too. After all, there are few gamers remaining who would pay upwards of £120 for a copy of *Radiant Silvergun* when a pitch-perfect port exists on XBLA for a tenth of the price.

> It's ironic now that one of the benefits of living in Tokyo is not ever having to bother going out to Akihabara any more

Vintage game shops in Akihabara's 'Electric Town' – which used to span as far as the eye could see – have pretty much dwindled down to one sole survivor: Super Potato. And the only people who go to Super Potato are foreigners who are too green to resist the allure of aisles and aisles of vastly overpriced Famicom systems and cartridges. Super Potato presents an impressive if endangered sight, running parallel to the main street, where shops like Sofmap and Bic Camera all hawk identical wares. Imagine living on a street where there are three or four Game shops. Could you imagine stopping in each one to see 'what's new'? It'd get old quick. The rest of Electric Town is a small, scattered selection of anime-themed manga shops, maid cafés, toy and figure shops, and hentai PC games. There's really little else. What used to seemingly span miles of Akihabara is now condensed down into a couple of blocks.

It's ironic now that one of the benefits of living in Tokyo is not ever having to bother going out to Akihabara any more. If I do make the effort, it's mostly an ironic trip, endured primarily for old time's sake, and to see how badly things have deteriorated in terms of gaming relevance. Sure, there are a couple of Sega Joypolises (multi-floor arcade centres), but most of the arcade games have given way to multiplayer horse racing games and UFO catchers shilling licensed merchandise. Of course, there are the soul-destroying *Gundam* and [Japanese prefab pop group] AKB48 cafés, pandering to the most captive of audiences, but it's a sad reminder of what once was.

For years, I tried to ignore the fact that Akihabara's relevance as the gaming capital of the world had finally come to an end, but a recent sojourn out to Electric Town – in which I failed to find a very common Dreamcast game after hours of searching – all but confirmed this. The fact that I was able to quickly find the same game on Amazon.jp immediately after returning home (for a single yen, plus the cost of shipping) suggests that I may never return to Akihabara again. The increasingly digital archiving of gaming's glorious past all but ensures this.

James Mielke is a producer at Q Entertainment



About Face

→ Why The Last Of Us' Ellie no longer looks like Ellen Page

Naughty Dog has altered the design of its lead female character, Ellie, in *The Last Of Us*. While it would seem that the developer sought to distance itself from criticisms highlighting the character's visual similarities to actress Ellen Page, creative director Neil Druckmann offers a different explanation. "After delving further into the game's narrative over the past few months, we decided to modify Ellie's model to better reflect [voice actor] Ashley Johnson's personality, and also resemble a slightly younger teen more fitting to the story," he says in an interview with IGN. The character of Ellie certainly avoids comparisons with Ellen Page now – the name notwithstanding – but perhaps more interesting is the subtle change to the face of male lead Joel, who is now noticeably aged, presumably in order to emphasise Ellie's youth even further.


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WHY I ♥...

Starcraft

SID MEIER, FIRAXIS GAMES

"I'm going to avoid my games. I'm going to say that probably Starcraft would be my favourite game. I think, on all levels, Starcraft is excellent. In terms of the way the visuals serve the game, the way the game plays, the interface is clearly made by gamers, and has been played by gamers, and it was released when the designers felt it was as good as it could be. There's a bunch of great games out there that I've really enjoyed playing, but if I had to choose one, I would choose Starcraft."



"The interface is clearly made by gamers, and has been played by gamers, and it was released when the designers felt it was as good as it could be"

SID MEIER, FIRAXIS GAMES

PREVIEWS CONTENTS



Say hello to David Mason. He's the generic star of *Black Ops II*, son of *Black Ops*' generic protagonist, embodying the generic soldier look and no doubt to be voiced by some generic Hollywood actor.

Below: From early footage of *Black Ops II*, we can already tell it will rival Infinity Ward/Sledgehammer Games' *Modern Warfare 3* when it comes to screen-engulfing explosions and sheer bombast.

Above: The real-time strategy elements is the first legitimate breath of fresh air in the franchise since the original *Modern Warfare* redefined the genre.

Call Of Duty: Black Ops II

CONCEPT ■ The usual glitz and gunplay gets a tactical edge, with RTS elements, a full zombie campaign and robots. Lots of robots.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Origin: US
Publisher: Activision
Developer: Treyarch
Release: 13 November
Players: TBA

Series Profile

When WWII shooters were in vogue, *Call Of Duty* was ruler of the kingdom. Infinity Ward's first entries in the saga invigorated the genre with bombast and bravado – an energetic juxtaposition to the otherwise stark tone of its contemporaries. Treyarch followed with a less innovative third entry. But it's with *Modern Warfare* that Infinity Ward burrowed into the zeitgeist and set the template for the genre that would be adhered to for the rest of the franchise – and by every major competitor.

Series History

Call Of Duty: Black Ops **2010 [Multi]**
Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare **2007 [Multi]**
Call Of Duty 3 **2006 [Multi]**
Call Of Duty **2003 [Multi]**

High Point

The original *Modern Warfare* was an unprecedented leap in the genre that became the yardstick for contemporary action games.

Post-modern Warfare

When you're the biggest entertainment brand in the world there isn't a lot that you have to worry about. Activision's *Call Of Duty* franchise isn't just dominating the videogame marketplace on an annual basis, but it has become a gaming event unlike anything else in the industry.

Call Of Duty: Black Ops II is the ninth entry in the enduring main series, and the third part in Treyarch's *Black Ops* canon that began down in the conformity of World War II trenches, through the Tarantino-esque non-linearity and narrative throes of Vietnam, and will culminate rather appositely in the limitless realm of the future.

It's LA circa 2025, the streets are deserted and a US military drone force is raining down destruction to the once-iridescent city. David Mason (son of *Black Ops* protagonist and fan of amateur orthodontistry Alex Mason) is escorting the President to a safe location. Gazing out of the window, his eyes refocus from the escalating violence on the streets to the immediate danger within the vehicle.

Treyarch has gone to great lengths to significantly enhance the existing game engine, not just to elevate the electrifying set-pieces but to add evocative and emotional resonance to the story. Right now, one of the presidential bodyguards is bleeding out inside the vehicle, his distorted face and cries of anguish representative of the impeccable new facial animations in the game.

"Graphically, the team is pushing it," gloats Treyarch Studio Head, Mark Lamia." We have totally reworked our graphics and lighting system and the game is looking better than ever, but it's also about the art design. We've introduced new techniques that they have been working into the game and visually we want to push the bar. Suffice to say there's a lot that's going on."

It's hard to disagree with Lamia's last sentence, as *COD*'s chaotic roots come to the forefront as the convoy is intercepted. Mason is now vulnerable on the city streets, as unmanned drones and stealth bombers lay waste to the skyline – a punchy visual easily surpassing the explosive histrionics of *Modern Warfare 3*'s opening fanfare.

Now on foot, *Black Ops II* reverts to the ingrained *COD* template: enemies swarm the battlefield, dispensed in quick succession as Mason navigates between cover, entering shops and quelling the abrupt threat promptly.

/// Free to innovate within the futuristic time period, Treyarch has explored some interesting technological avenues with the sequel. In one basic example of how this comes to fruition, Mason uses his advanced ACOG scope to see through objects and assassinate enemies hiding behind cover. But there are wider applications, which not only invigorate gameplay but also alter the franchise at its core.

By now you've likely seen quadrotors and other mech-like machinery buzzing through *Black Ops II*'s hyperbole-fuelling marketing material, but out of context it may seem nothing if not a nonessential frill to illustrate the setting. However, they quickly prove to be an essential gameplay component, offering diversity not previously seen within the franchise. Mason can send quadrotors ahead into enemy territory, the player can then choose to either take control of one of the flying bots' first-person perspective or fight alongside them on foot.

> "Any preconceptions you have about any weapons in the Call Of Duty franchise should be set aside"
> MARK LAMIA TREYARCH

Later in the mission, Mason encounters a CLAW (a human-sized mech, with more than a passing resemblance to *Metal Gear*), which he can hack with the aid of his wrist-mounted hacking dart. Now in full control of the armoured machine, Mason lumbers around the environment, scattering enemy troops and doling out a significant amount of damage to the enemy forces. It's uncertain whether or not these segments act as interludes and respite

to stretches of main gameplay, but if not then they add a refreshing layer of strategy over the increasingly staid *COD* formula – and it's significantly more gratifying to have direct input into the spectacle, rather than witnessing the destruction as an observer.

"I wasn't worried about the future setting disengaging players from the franchise," explains Lamia. "In fact, I think people are going to be excited to play an entirely new era. It's interesting from a fiction standpoint but it's really interesting in gameplay terms, and it's opened up all kinds of possibilities with weaponry and AI to play with. For players who have had a lot of great *Call Of Duty* experiences, we're going to be able to show them a lot more in this."

Echoing Lamia's thoughts, the action switches from on-foot to the air, as Mason leaps inside a harrier jet to supply air support for the president's convoy from above. Unleashing death on ground troops is the focus, until a dozen unmanned stealth bombers enter the fray and a taut chase takes precedence, using a mounted chaingun and missiles to take each of the attacking aircraft down, boosting from one target to the next. Treyarch has accomplished a satisfying balance between control and bombast, the jet's enhanced mobility enabling corkscrew dives, swift turns and breakneck thrusts that dispenses any notion that, apart from a segment at the chapter's close, this is another exhausted on-rails sequence.

> "We have totally reworked our graphics and lighting system and the game is looking better than ever"
> MARK LAMIA TREYARCH

"The game has so many awesome situations," Lamia beams as that portion of the demo comes to a close. "We've used the original *Black Ops* as a starting point on how we tell stories. There are branching stories – so consequences from what happens while you play the game will have an impact on overall arc, and there's non-linearity introduced in the single-player."

Black Ops II's Strike Force Operation missions are described to us by Lamia as "proxy wars", with each of these campaign missions set within a small sandbox environment, and offering a more expansive objective-based challenge. While the setting is more reminiscent of a multiplayer map than the design tropes familiar to campaign scenarios, Treyarch has utilised the future setting to enable players to approach missions in a multitude of ways.

With the objective to disengage two enemy shields within a twenty-minute time limit so a valuable enemy target can be destroyed, the small team of operatives rappel down to a Singapore dockyard overrun with hostiles. Here, players are presented with a choice: either tackle the mission in traditional *COD* style and engage enemies on foot, take to the skies in a quadrotor while AI controls your squad, or head into Overwatch mode.

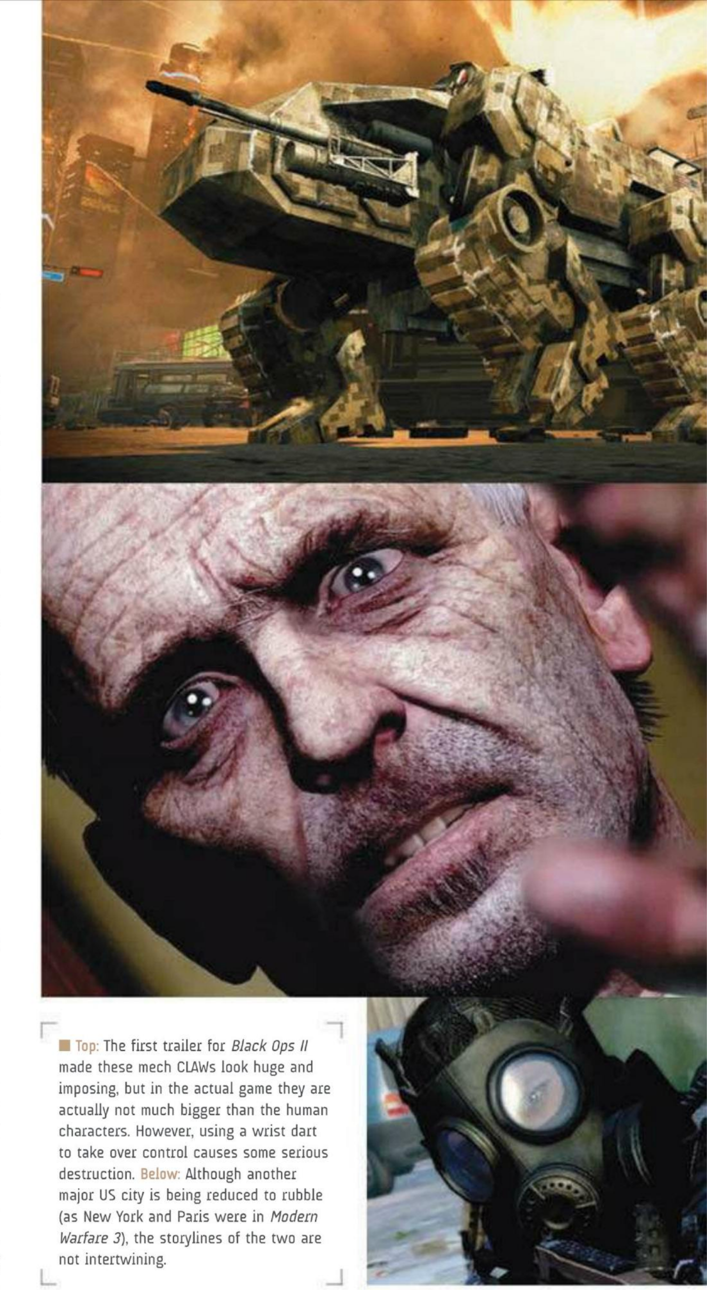
/// The most drastic divergence from the *COD* template, Overwatch enables players to look over the map from an RTS perspective, set waypoints, use x-ray vision and direct human and robotic members of the squad across the map. Players are not confined to one of these viewpoints during the conflict, instead you can freely move about between perspectives – effectively layering a meticulous *Rainbow Six*-style experience on top of the now paint-by-numbers *Call Of Duty* gameplay.

Even more promising than this brief genre shift are the ramifications that these missions can have on the overall story. There's no mission failure, no immoral war quotation accompanied by a condescending breakdown of why you die ('avoid standing next to grenades') and no reverting back to the last checkpoint. Whether you successfully accomplish mission objectives, half achieve them or completely fail, the game will just continue, the narrative shifting and branching into multiple directions.

"In *Black Ops II* we'll present choices to you a lot," explains Lamia. "Some of them will be gameplay choices with consequences that will not have occurred to you, but it's all done in *Call Of Duty*'s style. Whether you make a certain choice or not, it won't stop the game, and that's not what's expected of *Call Of Duty*. Sometimes there will be consequences whether you choose to act or not, but the significance of that will not be revealed to you until later in the game, and that's an exciting part of the fiction."

Some might say these revisions of the formula are completely unnecessary. After all, *Call Of Duty* is both critically and commercially celebrated for refining its gameplay to an immaculately polished degree, and such alterations have the potential to rub the core fanbase up the wrong way. But without risk comes little reward, and it's refreshing that for the studio often considered as the weaker of the two *COD*-churners, Treyarch is leading the charge when it comes to the next major evolution in the franchise.

As the most innovative, progressive and riskiest entry so far, eyes will be on the community and how they will react to this bold new direction. We're excited, but you've got to imagine that Activision might be wondering if longtime fans will take to the upheaval.



■ Top: The first trailer for *Black Ops II* made these mech CLAWs look huge and imposing, but in the actual game they are actually not much bigger than the human characters. However, using a wrist dart to take over control causes some serious destruction. Below: Although another major US city is being reduced to rubble (as New York and Paris were in *Modern Warfare 3*), the storylines of the two are not intertwining.



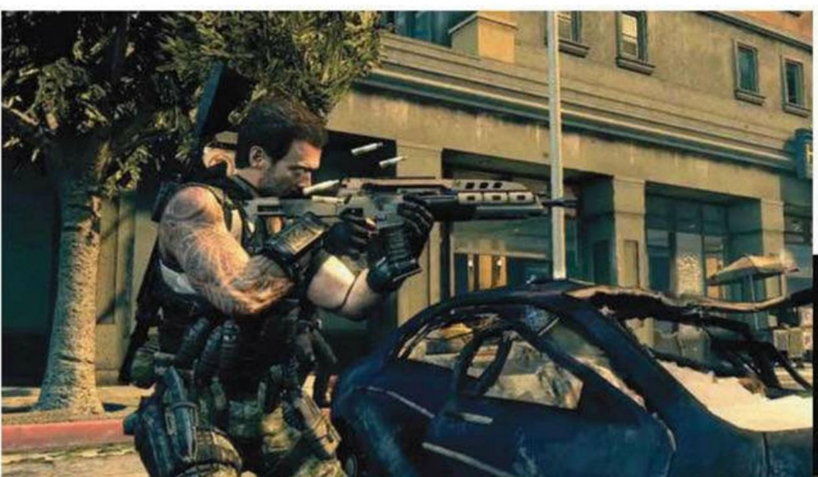
■ Right: These quadrotors can be manually operated and flown by the player to clear out rooms ahead of the player character, or alternatively can be used as a valuable, less-fleshy ally to fight alongside.



RETURN OF THE LIVING DEAD

A TREYARCH entry into the *Call Of Duty* saga wouldn't be complete without the secondary zombie mode attached. With this third instalment in the increasingly popular and expanded undead mode, Treyarch has added four-versus-four multiplayer alongside a whole cooperative campaign. While exact specifics of the mode have yet to be released, the developer has confirmed that it will utilise a new engine (the same as *Black Ops II*'s multiplayer), and that the larger scope for the auxiliary mode is comprehensive enough to justify a full game in its own right. If it has evolved as much as Treyarch is suggesting, it may put the final nail in the coffin for full retail zombie games in the future.





Above: Vehicular combat seems vastly improved. Treyarch has gone to great lengths to make players feel more in control of aerial vehicles and distance itself from the on-rails sequences featured in previous instalments. **Left:** *Black Ops* protagonist Alex Mason will appear once again in flashback segments that take place during the Eighties. Expect some suitably cagey Cold War action, and possibly some more numbers-based gibberish.



A REAL JOKER

REGARDLESS OF whether you appreciated the subtle voice work of Sam 'LOUD NOISES' Worthington in *Black Ops*, it at least attempted to provide a complex narrative. David S. Goyer – Hollywood screenwriter and the man solely responsible for cinematic atrocity *Blade Trinity* – has taken over full scripting duties for the sequel, after outlining a story for its predecessor. Arguably, Goyer's finest work has been as a consultant and collaborator on films such as Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight*, and Treyarch is quick to make a comparison. "We've created this multidimensional villain," says Treyarch studio head Mark Lamia. "We're talking about a character that's been created by David S. Goyer, the same guy that created Heath Ledger's Joker, so this is going to be a really intense game." Hmmm, comparing an archetypal *COD* villain to an Oscar-winning performance with added posthumous mawk factor… that won't bite you on the ass.

GON WITH THE WIND

WHILE HARADA manages to remain tight-lipped about the officially returning fighters that will bump the *Tekken Tag 2* roster over the 50 milestone, rumours and hints about which of the few absentees will make it into the home version are naturally rife. Chief among these is the implied return of Gon – the flatulent little dinosaur who leapt off the pages of Japanese comics to cameo in *Tekken 3* – with Harada suggesting that one of the minigames in the new Fight Lab mode could teach players the importance of juggling by having them repeatedly smack the little nuisance to keep him airborne. It'd be cool to see him again (if mainly for trolling purposes), though we'd also like to see Namco Bandai resurrect some of its other forgotten faces, such as Kunimitsu.

■ Above: Harada recently revealed that every character has their own story cinematics. Hopefully one of them will explain Heihachi's miraculous return to youth.





■ Left: Two-on-one fights will be balanced in terms of damage dealt and taken, though duos will usually have something of an advantage in the potential for elongated tag combos.

Tekken Tag Tournament 2

CONCEPT The ultimate Iron Fist celebration, starring over 50 of the franchise's famous faces in an anything-goes take on the tournament.

Championing the gamer's right to bear arms since 1994

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox 360, PlayStation 3
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Namco Bandai
Developer: In-house
Release: September
Players: 1-4

Series Profile

As the latest trailer for the home port of *Tekken Tag Tournament 2* makes abundantly clear, Namco's fighter is the world's most successful with over 40 million units shifted to date. The early games shifted PlayStations by the bucketload and, while more recent editions might not have had quite the same impact, Namco Bandai still knows how to bring an arcade game home like no other developer.

Series History

Tekken Hybrid **2011 [PlayStation 3]**
Tekken Bowl **2011 [iOS]**
Tekken 6 **2009 [Multi]**
Tekken Advance **2002 [Game Boy Advance]**
Tekken 2 **1996 [Multi]**

High Point

You'll get a different answer depending on who you ask – *3* is a frontrunner, but *6* arguably trumps the lot.

Trust *Bloody Roar* to let the side down. In a single 12-month period, the market will have seen shiny new versions of pretty much every other major fighting franchise. Everything from *SoulCalibur* to *BlazBlue* and *Street Fighter* to *Virtua Fighter* has been sent into battle once more, but the one glaring omission is characters that turn into angular animals mid-bout. With what will be the third outing for the *Tekken* cast in a year, we do at least have the next best thing – no transformations perhaps, but the ability to launch your opponent then tag in a bear or a kangaroo to finish the combo for you. And if *Tekken*'s fighting animals aren't enough of a hook for you, the crazy combo system of the *Tag* games and the inclusive roster should be more than enough to attract you back to the King Of Iron Fist Tournament for the most exaggerated and ridiculous chapter in the tournament's history.

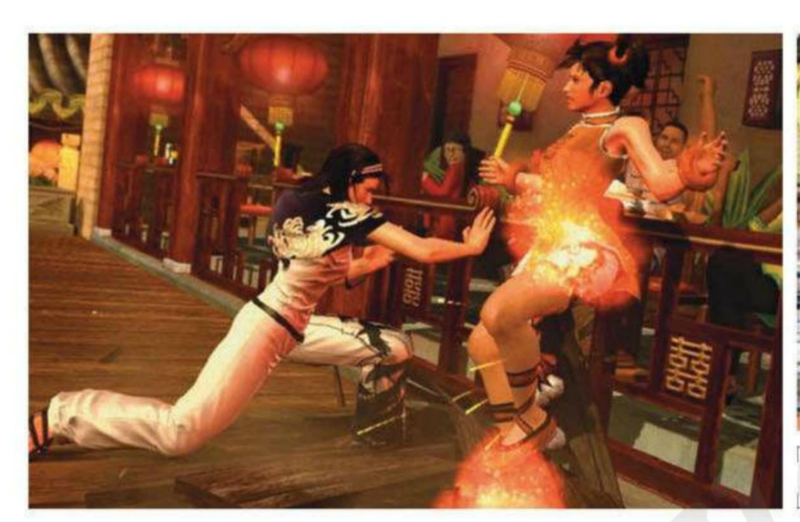
The arcade version of *TTT2* launched towards the end of last year with a balance update (on which this home version is based) following in March, but it won't be a straight port – Namco has a great track record for beefing up home versions of *Tekken* games with all manner of exclusive extras and *Tag 2* is no exception, the first and most obvious addition being the improved roster. "We're actually up to 50 now," boasts producer Katsuhiro Harada, who comes across as far more grounded when he doesn't have Ono around to egg him on. "Itagaki from the *Dead Or Alive* series said something similar to 'you have way too many characters in your game'. But, we're probably okay up until about 60." Still, that problem number creeps ever closer with each iteration, so we can only hope that the team hasn't bitten off more than it can chew from a balancing perspective. Harada doesn't seem all that worried, though. "Realistically, players only use three or four of their favourite characters. It's not about the overall volume, more making sure that the characters you like are in the game."

/// But in populating and balancing the game, Harada expresses how difficult it is to keep existing players happy without alienating newcomers. "You have to be careful you don't go too far and leave the mid and lower casual players behind," he reasons. "We understand what the core players are saying and we really feel the same way about a lot of the issues, but we have to intentionally rein it in and listen to some of the lighter audiences issues, or even the needs of fans that don't play our game but some day might. We have to make an effort to implement stuff they would be attracted to."

> "I see characters and their move sets as kind of like chess pieces… we would never sell them individually"
> KATSUHIRO HARADA NAMCO BANDAI

It's this open-door policy that inspires *Tag 2*'s chief innovation, the Fight Lab. Here, you'll learn the basics of attack and defence through to more advanced lessons that deal with understanding mix-ups and attack properties in the company of Combot, with the robotic fighter earning new aesthetic and practical upgrades as you spend more time in the lab with him. The potential is huge, his move set apparently fully customisable with some of the most iconic attacks employed from the franchise's cast, though hopefully this comes in a form closer to a true create-a-fighter option rather than simply allowing him to learn a couple of extra special moves on top of his basic set. Still, it's an ingenious way of making learning fun – using minigames and challenges that educate on a fundamental level – and it's likely to be just the start of the on-disc silliness when the game ships.

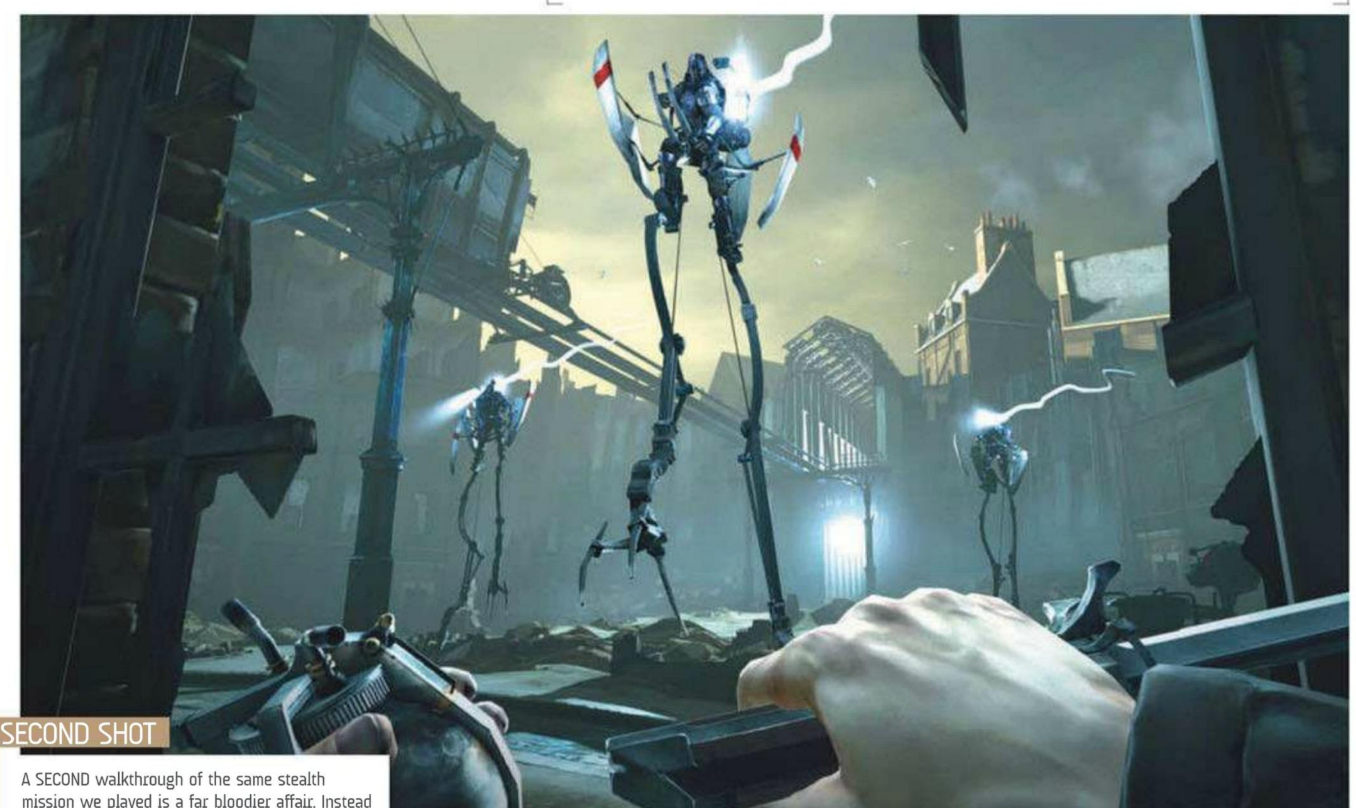
Ultimately, though, it's all about what happens once the characters step into the ring, and, in that respect, expect improvements across the board. Mechanically, it's a refined version of the original, with a broader cast, new team attacks and the offer of balanced two-on-one battles in line with *Capcom Vs. SNK*'s ratio system (or more recently *Skullgirls*' team options) making it a far more versatile and explosive tool set than anything to carry the *Tekken* name so far. It's no *Bloody Roar*, but hey, what is, right?





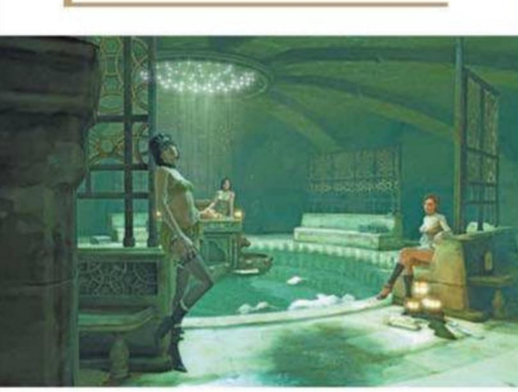
Above: The Rage mechanic works differently for solo fighters and teams – loners get *Tekken 6*'s last-ditch version while pairs get a new system that encourages timely tags.

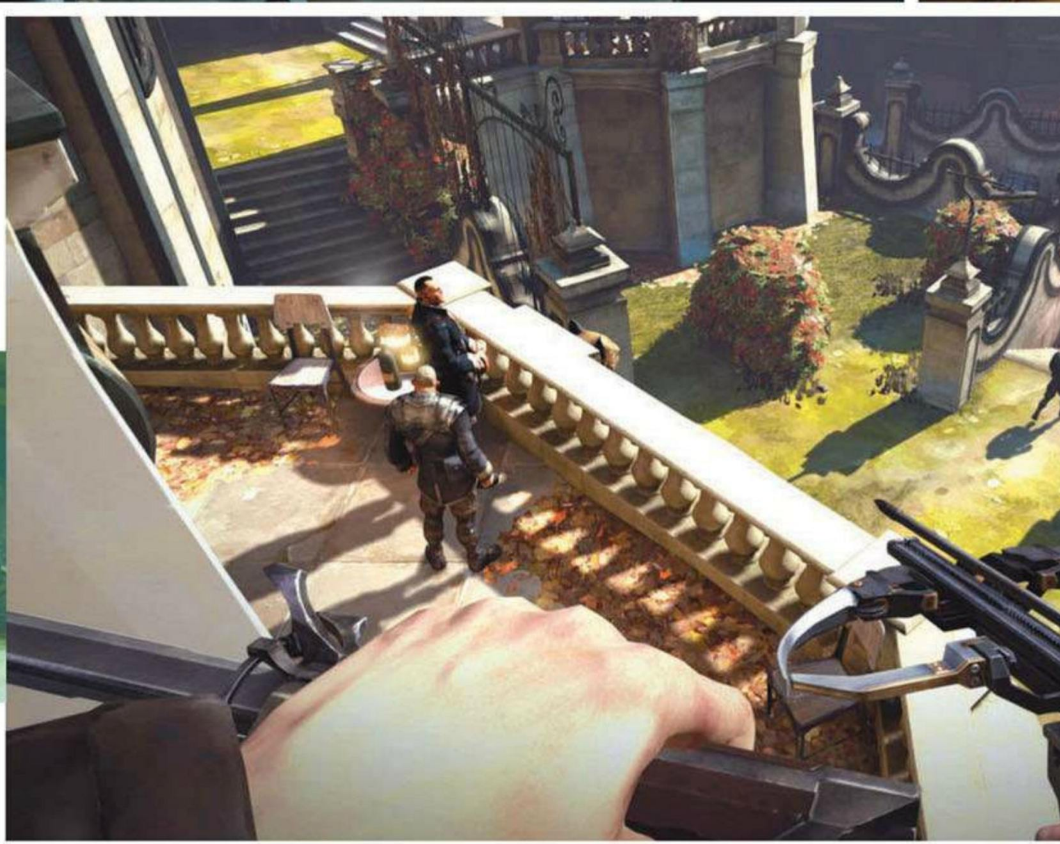
■ Right: There's such a large abundance of special abilities throughout the game that Arkane Studios has only unveiled a few to date. Study the debut trailer closely and you'll see telekinesis, freeze and quick-movement abilities among others. Below: Every enemy in the game can be subdued without killing them. But where's the fun in that?



SECOND SHOT

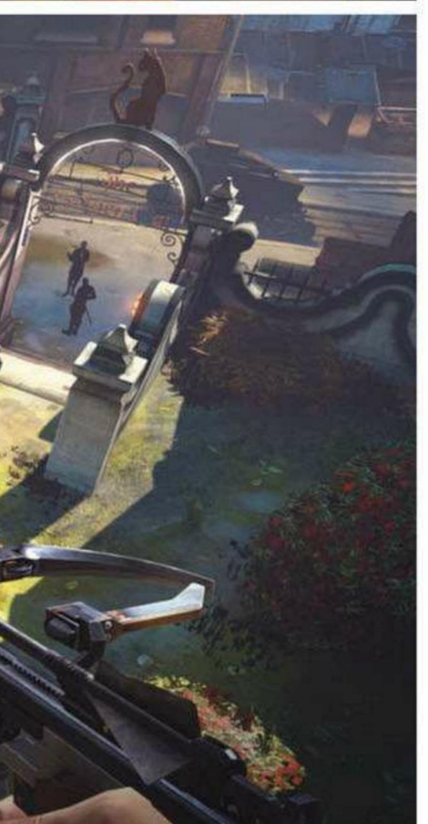
A SECOND walkthrough of the same stealth mission we played is a far bloodier affair. Instead of quietly navigating his way around guards and infiltrating the building through possession, Corvo drops down from above and stabs an enemy in the neck. This spirals into a larger swordfight, Corvo battling multiple enemies simultaneously as he tries to reach his designated target. As the debut trailer showcased, in these combat situations Corvo will use abilities that enable him to move quickly over short distances, stop bullets and alter their trajectory, and evaporate enemies in a burst of flames. There's an encouraging balance between stealth and combat gameplay here that should satisfy sneaky types and hardened shooter fans in equal measure.





■ Above: Corvo is sure to gain a few fans as his notoriety grows. Right: Blink enables Corvo to teleport short distances – perfect for stealth players who want to get the jump on unsuspecting guards.





Dishonored

CONCEPT ■ Dishonered is a heavily stylised stealth action game set in a Neo-Victorian dystopia. Crucially, you get to kill a lot of people, if you fancy it.

Revenge is a dish best served old

It shouldn't come as much of a surprise that in today's increasingly cluttered and competitive gaming marketplace that games rarely stand out unless directly compared to existing success stories. Military shooters are rarely purported to be anything less than 'the next *COD*'; a new fantasy-based MMO is destined to be a '*World Of Warcraft* beater', and any RPG released in the last year has been blithely labelled 'the new *Skyrim*'.

Dishonored welcomes its own obvious comparisons more than most, placing the city of Dunwall at the forefront of its latest marketing push – the rich Gothic conurbation by City 17 creator Viktor Antonov evoking Orwellian themes – alongside a showcase of biotic abilities that recall *Half-Life 2's* world and *BioShock's* gameplay respectively. However, look closer and you'll see *Dishonored*'s influences are much more widespread.

Taking a stealth approach to gameplay, players can scurry up structures to gain a vertical advantage on enemies. It has a little bit of an *Assassin's Creed* vibe to it, but there's a twist. A wide variety of abilities enable players to focus on one particular method of play. For instance, using Blink teleports player character Corvo over to new platforms and get a spring on enemies – which is then reinforced by instant stealth kills.

"A lot of our inspiration for games in general comes first from mechanics, and then we look for ways to justify those mechanics, frankly," says lead designer Harvey Smith. "We say things like 'With a game featuring a supernatural assassin, what would be a useful power?' and, for example, possession would be one."

Possession isn't an ability that is employed in a traditional sense (taking over the body of an enemy to kill another, which has been done to death). Instead, it'll be used more effectively to scout out locations and find secret entrances, as we find in one scenario. Outside of a key location, Corvo takes the form of a carp, after which he's able to swim through a secret entrance and enter undetected.

It evokes Smith's previous work on *Deus Ex* quite considerably. Not that you turned into a carp in that. No, what we mean is that each mission is handcrafted to such a degree that it can be approached from multiple angles. "We believe very much in hand crafting each mission location," explains Smith. "Visual storytelling, lots of little details that tell you who lives there, what happened right before you got there. It's a highly detailed, rich world. It's not open-world – it's a linear collection of story missions – but within each mission is highly non-linear."

The framework for this cloak-and-dagger game of death is revenge. Corvo is out for blood, seeking retribution against the Lord Regent who framed him for the assassination of the Empress. It's a rather cut-and-dry scenario but it's the world itself that holds the promise for surprises, with steampunk robot exoskeletons guarding city streets and a plague that is currently infecting citizens. Smith and his team at Arkane Studios worked hard to ensure that there was a tangible backbone to the world that could be expanded upon in future instalments or spin-off fiction.

"There's a place called the Isles which are four major nations," describes Smith, "and there's a vast ocean with no other landmasses, except in the far distance there's a huge landmass that's very hostile, full of deserts and disease called the Pandyssian Continent. Dunwall is the capital city of the Isles and of that empire, and the game takes place exclusively in Dunwall. That's the backdrop of the world, but we also believe in making the world seem much larger than it actually is."

> "This is really about more abstract and stylised games – that's the future"
> VIKTOR ANTONOV ARKANE STUDIOS

As the demo comes to a close – with Corvo unleashing a poisonous toxin on his final target so he can make his sudden demise appear as an accident – it's clear that *Dishonored* has every chance of becoming Bethesda's next big IP. It may borrow liberally from any number of titles – including some of Smith's own – but it retains its own identity throughout. And you never know, this time next year we might be calling one of 2013's first-person shooters "the next *Dishonored*."

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Origin: US
Publisher: Bethesda Softworks
Developer: Arkane Studios
Release: 12 October
Players: TBA

Developer Profile

Arkane Studios is a relatively low-key operation that has been working since 1999. Its biggest title to date is *Dark Messiah Of Might And Magic*, but perhaps the studio is more notoriously known for a game it hasn't released, working in conjunction with Valve Software for a year on a *Half-Life* spin-off called *Return To Ravenholm*. The project has since been canned, and the studio's only other credit in the last six years is providing design assistance on *BioShock 2* and map work on the *Call Of Duty* franchise.

Developer History

BioShock 2
2010 [Multi]

Arx Fatalis: Collector's Edition
2007 [PC]

Dark Messiah Of Might and Magic
2006 [Multi]

High Point

Dark Messiah Of Might And Magic was okay, making it a much higher watermark than *Arx Fatalis* (which we scored 2/10), or BioShock's disappointing afterthought of a multiplayer bolt-on.

■ Right: New courses don't just swap between land, air and water segments; they'll feature surprises along the way too. This *Super Monkey Ball* stage features a brief mini-game of Monkey Target halfway through.





INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PlayStation 3, 3DS, PS Vita, Xbox 360
Origin: UK
Publisher: Sega
Developer: Sumo Digital
Release: 2012
Players: 1-8

Developer Profile

Formed in 2003 with the remnants of Infogrames Studios, Sumo Digital has worked on a plethora of Sega licences, including *OutRun*, *Virtua Tennis* and *Sega Superstars Tennis*. Alongside work with Sega, the studio has established a strong back catalogue of portable and downloadable titles for the likes of EA, Codemasters and Disney Interactive.

Developer History

Sonic & Sega All-Stars Racing
2010 [Multi]

Virtua Tennis 3
2007 [Multi]

Super Rub 'a' Dub
2007 [PlayStation 3]

OutRun 2
2004 [Xbox]

High Point

OutRun Online Arcade was basically another port of *Outrun 2*, but it was no less essential for it.

Sonic & All-Stars Racing Transformed

CONCEPT ■ A sequel to 2010's *Mario Kart*-esque racer, this model has another bevy of Sega mascots racing across land, water and sky.

Among all the challenges faced by developers crafting an energetic, colourful and mascot-driven racing game – whether it be weapon balancing, the ebb of track design, or just which IP to pilfer colourful characters from – the hardest is undoubtedly not appearing like a brazen *Mario Kart* clone. Of course, it would have been impossible for the original *Sonic & Sega All-Stars Racing* to avoid such comparisons – what with the plumber being Sonic's age-old nemesis – but try as hard as it might, it lacked the immediate accessibility and thorough depth that propelled Mario and his karting chums into critical and commercial acclaim. For developer Sumo Digital, approaching a sequel was less about iterating and more about overhauling the experience to better serve the versatility of Sega's most notable heroes and finally step out from Mario's shadow.

"We spent a bit of time with Sega trying to make a game that wasn't just a direct sequel," explains Joe Neate, producer at Sumo Digital. "We didn't want to go, 'Well, that game did well, everybody liked it, let's just use the same engine and just get something with new characters and new tracks in.' We wanted something that not only built on what was great about the last game but pushed the boundaries of the kart racing genre."

Quite rightly, these innovations transpire in a wide variety of forms, the most notable of which is the transforming karts that Sonic and his chums will drive. The vehicles in *Sonic & All-Star Racing Transformed* will react according to the terrain, switching between karts, boats and aircrafts. A *Panzer Dragoon*-themed track sets the tone for the remainder of our hands-on time with the sequel, the stage physically transforming across a three-lap race. It begins as a traditional course for karts, twisting through a sandy canyon as a dragon battles in the background, but as the race enters the second lap the whole course fills with water, forcing Sonic's kart to transform into a hovercraft. It's a slick manoeuvre, tarnished slightly by a crude transition to air in the final leg of the race.

/// And if the concept doesn't appear particularly fresh, then that's because that plucky plumber beat Sumo Digital to the punch with last year's *Mario Kart 7* on 3DS – which came as something as a surprise to the developer. "We were sitting in a meeting room at work watching the E3 conferences and Nintendo came on and we all wondered if they'd be doing a new *Mario Kart*" Neate exclaims. "Then they had a montage of things and you had a kart sprout wings, and we all looked around the room, and then you saw a car go into water and we were all like, 'No fucking way!' But then they went into each one in depth and, although it's kind of flying, it's more falling with style. Whereas the driving underwater... that's not boating. There will be a few people who think we're copying them – but no! We've been making this game for 18 months. But that's the nature of it, and we feel confident from watching people play it and hearing opinions that people are really enjoying it, especially the freedom of flying and that the boating is actually quite challenging to do."

> "There's room for more than one racer and there are so many platforms to look at"
> JOE NEATE SUMO DIGITAL

Indeed, it's fair to say that this isn't a retread of *Mario Kart 7*'s achievements. The environments are slightly more linear (routes don't branch into alternative air, water and ground tiers) but tracks gleefully toy with convention – a *Super Monkey Ball* stage has a brief Monkey Target interlude – and there are a wider variety of characters from Sega's history – two new additions to the roster are Gilius Thunderhead of *Golden Axe* and Vyse of *Skies Of Arcadia*. But the fact of the matter is that, in an effort to move away from the established tropes of classic *Mario Kart*, the studio has inadvertently welcomed more comparisons than ever in the slipstream of *Mario Kart 7*. For now, Sonic will have some serious catching up to do if he has a chance of overtaking Mario this late in the game.



■ Right: The vehicles in *Sonic & All-Stars Racing Transformed* possess a little more heft than the models featured in its predecessor. That might be due to lead designer Gareth Wilson, whose work at Bizarre Creations includes *Blur* and *Project Gotham Racing*.





CAR TROUBLES

"WHEN WE pick our characters we always think, 'Well, can we make cool vehicles for them?'" explains producer Joe Neate on picking new characters for the sequel. "With Vyse it was so easy. He's already got a boat that flies, so we'll just give it wheels and job done." *Golden Axe*'s Gilius required more inspiration. "You know the Harryhausen films where the statues come to life? Gilius' vehicle is a statue that has come to life, so if you look at it on the land it's a stone bull grasping onto stone wheels with its hand but it moves quite slowly and its eyes glow when it comes to life. Then it transforms into a swimming turtle and a flying eagle. It's very much stop-motion movement; it's totally inspired by that."





■ Above: Naturally, a mix of both defensive and offensive weapons return, each of which is unique to your particular driver. Below: While there are superficial similarities to *Mario Kart 7*, the boats here run over water rather than race on the bottom, and planes travel through the sky rather than "fall with style."



Lost Planet 3

CONCEPT ■ Spark Unlimited looks to both repair its tarnished reputation and breathe new life into Capcom's *Lost Planet* franchise with a combination of survival-horror and giant mech combat.

Coming back in from the cold has never felt better

It won't be news to anyone by now that Capcom's strategy of putting its various IPs into the hands of Western developers has had seriously mixed results. For every success like Blue Castle Games' *Dead Rising 2*, you've several abject failures like Grin's *Bionic Commando*, and it's hard not to view the entire process as a massive gamble.

That looks especially true with *Lost Planet 3*, in which Capcom is dealing with two very wild cards. While it had its adherents, *Lost Planet 2*'s odd multiplayer-focused approach was divisive, and the Western developer that Capcom has chosen, Spark Unlimited, has a dicey reputation earned crafting disappointing shooters *Legendary* and *Turning Point: Fall Of Liberty*.

But there's an inherent strength in collaboration and, backed by Capcom, it appears Spark Unlimited is successfully recasting *Lost Planet 3* as a bold hybrid, blending third-person survival-horror and large-scale first-person mech combat. It's also imbuing this prequel, set in the years when humanity first settled EDN III, with a very Western narrative sensibility rooted in gritty sci-fi cinema – yet retaining a Japanese gameplay flavour. You play as Jim, a freelance heat miner working to provide for his family on Earth, and there's a frontier vibe to *Lost Planet 3*, with exploration of the planet's surface done in hulking mechs.

/// Entering your mech switches your perspective from third-person to towering first-person, and you feel immensely powerful, thanks to its huge grasping claw and powerful drill, which can be used to crush Akrid attackers. But EDN III's sub-zero temperatures constantly freeze your rig, forcing you out onto the plains to de-ice it, where cat-like predator Akrid attack. Here *Lost Planet 3*'s more traditional third-person combat is punctuated by dramatic, bloody QTEs triggered whenever enemies pin you down, and obvious similarities between *Lost Planet 3* and *Dead Space* quickly emerge. There's a sense of danger with every step outside of your mech, as things like your projected HUD are dependent on you being near it. Moving too far away will leave you devoid of waypoints as you explore blindly through dark ice caverns and abandoned structures.

That sense of hidden danger is justified as we explore a cavern and an armoured Akrid bursts out of the ground and attacks. Glowing heat points indicate where the armoured beast is vulnerable on the joints between the arms and pincers and its ice-covered back, and, dodging its enraged charges, we blow off its claws and pump shotgun rounds into its back until it expires.

Spark Unlimited has seemingly imbued *Lost Planet* with a real sense of pacing, battles with gigantic monster Akrid offset by harrowing, *Alien*-inspired encounters with nasty scuttling variants that stalk from the shadows. It's easy to feel overwhelmed, and while the original *Lost Planet*'s tedious body heat mechanic is gone, Jim still has to gather energy from dead Akrid to power up the mech. Capcom claims that not collecting enough can see you stuck on the frozen plains.

It all leads to a great sense of tension, but *Lost Planet 3*'s biggest strength is simply the contrast between your vulnerability on foot and your awesome power when battling against towering monsters in your mech. This *Godzilla*-style combat sees you able to grasp a giant Akrid's pincers with your mech arm and drill into the exposed joint until it rips off in a shower of gore. With its claws removed, you then simply grasp the flailing beast and drill into its exposed back, spraying orange blood over your mech's windshield as it expires.

What's looking impressive is how well *Lost Planet 3*'s survival-horror, giant mech battle elements and narrative approach meld. Much like the blend of Japanese game craft and Western game mechanics and narrative that Capcom and Spark Unlimited are jointly bringing to *Lost Planet 3*, the whole is looking greater than the sum of its parts. Capcom may well be taking a bit of a gamble on Spark Unlimited, but that's the thing about gambles: they occasionally pay off.

> "This is the closest that the franchise has come to my original vision"
> KENJI OGURO CAPCOM

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, PC
Origin: US
Publisher: Capcom
Developer: Spark Unlimited
Release: Q1 2013
Players: 1-TBA

Developer Profile

The California-based studio was responsible for the solid *Call Of Duty* spin-off *Finest Hour* on multiple platforms in 2004, but it hasn't been anywhere near as successful since. It holds the dubious honour of having developed *Legendary* and *Turning Point: Fall Of Liberty*, widely considered two of the worst shooters of this generation.

Developer History

Call Of Duty: Finest Hour **2004 [Multi]**
Turning Point: Fall Of Liberty **2008 [Multi]**
Legendary **2008 [Multi]**

High Point

Up until this point, Spark Unlimited hasn't had a showing that was overly impressive. Its handling of *Call Of Duty: Finest Hour*, a last-generation entry in Activision's then-WWII shooter franchise, was good but nothing special.





■ Right: Letting Akrid get too close will allow them to pounce, triggering a frantic bout in which mashing a button and then stabbing them is the only escape.



COLD BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

LOST PLANET 3 isn't being developed on Capcom's MT Framework engine. Spark Unlimited has a background working on the Unreal Engine, and has chosen to create its game with it. It's proving to be a wise choice, giving *Lost Planet 3* the interesting feel of a dark Western sci-fi movie, and both the snowstorm-driven EDN III with its myriad glacial environments and the terrifying Akrid look impressively glorious and frightening. The human side of the story also benefits from the more realistic tone, with a narrative that promises to really focus on Jim as a believable character and charts his struggle for survival on the frozen plain through communication logs with his wife on Earth.

■ Above: The world of EDN III is a character in its own right in *Lost Planet 3*, with Spark Unlimited having crafted some beautiful ice world environments. Below: Sci-fi movie inspirations abound in the design of human environments and technology in *Lost Planet 3*, *Aliens* being foremost among them.



SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

ROGUE STAR

Format: iOS
Publisher: Redbreast Studios
Developer: In-house
ETA: October



WITH EIGHTIES space trading game *Elite* as a tonal touchstone, hands-on with an early build of *Rogue Star* – RedBreast Studios' inaugural iOS release – confirms it to be a worthy successor to its primary influence. Effortlessly evoking *Elite*'s retro mood and featuring a robust combat system at its core, it's shaping up to be a compact and manageable portable return to the genre.

GAME OF THRONES MMO

Format: PC
Publisher: Bigpoint Games
Developer: Artplant
ETA: November



BATTLESTAR GALACTICA Online developer Artplant is behind Bigpoint's next big browser-based MMO, *Game Of Thrones*. Talking to **games™**, the studio has announced its intention to follow the storyline of the HBO series rather than the novels, and will evolve over the years in tandem with the show. Executive Producer Rob Ollett explained that it "will be authentic in terms of the overall experience."

007 LEGENDS

Format: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Publisher: Activision
Developer: Eurocom
ETA: October



AFTER DELIVERING last year's perfunctory HD port of *007: GoldenEye*, Eurocom has started work on the next *James Bond*-licensed gun-'em-up, *007 Legends*. A loose tie-in to this year's Daniel Craig outing, *Skyfall*, *Legends* will cover the grand pantheon of Bond stories, recreating key cinematic scenes from across the entire series (including *Skyfall*) and somehow tying it all together in a neat little narrative bow.

RESET

Format: PC
Publisher: Theory Interactive
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2013



THE PASSION project of two bedroom coders, *Reset*'s concept – a first-person single-player co-op puzzler wherein you travel back in time to cooperate with yourself – has received its first teaser trailer. It's more a tonal piece than an indicator of gameplay, but was made, as Theory Interactive puts it, "straight from the in-game engine, no up-rezzed textures, geometry or effects."

FELYNE PUZZLE

Format: PSP
Publisher: Capcom
Developer: In-house
ETA: 19 July



SIMILAR TO *Monster Hunter Diary*, the latest spin-off of the ubiquitous *Monster Hunter* brand stars the cutesy Felyne mascots, in a what looks to be a clone of *Super Puzzle Fighter*. For those who've never played that game (get out!) it involves dropping exploding gems onto their corresponding colours and chaining combos to attack your opponent's half of the screen. Now with cats.

PES 2013

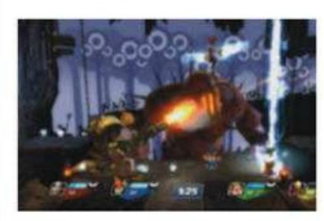
Format: Multi
Publisher: Konami
Developer: In-house
ETA: October



KONAMI MAY be touting the latest iteration of its franchise as "the most faithful recreation of modern-day football to date", but it's still a Division One team playing catch-up with its Premiership rival. The key innovation here is FullControl, providing better physics, tactical options and goalie control. Not that the latter will stop [insert derided sportsman here] from making a pig's ear of it.

PLAYSTATION ALL-STARS BATTLE ROYALE

Format: PlayStation 3
Publisher: Sony
Developer: SuperBot Entertainment
ETA: October



SONY HAS announced its rumoured *Smash Bros.* wannabe for Christmas. Colliding the worlds of *God Of War*, *Fat Princess* and *PaRappa The Rapper* may have all the subtlety of a Falcon Punch (and lacks the cohesiveness of Nintendo's beat-'em-up) but there are some interesting visual elements at play, especially with stage mash-ups that include merry Patapons dancing around *God Of War*'s Underworld.

AIR MAIL

Format: iOS, Android
Publisher: Chillingo
Developer: N-Fusion Interactive
ETA: July



FRONTED BY a blindingly vibrant aesthetic, this *PilotWings*-esque flight sim contains all the core tenets of the genre (swooping to grab items, flying through magical floating hoops). However, with a selectable advanced control method, there's more depth to this sim than its cutesy visuals suggest, with plenty of nuance to wrap your thumbs around as you fly through the seven distinct islands in the game.



CANCELLED – Dancing Eyes (PS3)

Bad news for fans of naked women and monkeys everywhere: the Move-compatible remake of *Dancing Eyes* has been permanently shelved. The game involves monkeys nibbling clothes off attractive women.



DELAYED – BioShock Infinite (Multi)

After what seems like an eternity in development, Irrational's skybound shooter has been pushed back to February 2013, to improve upon the game further, according to Ken Levine.

NEW SUPER MARIO BROS. 2

Format: 3DS
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: In-house
ETA: August



SATORU IWATA used the latest Nintendo Direct streaming conference to make the surprise announcement of a 3DS sequel to Wii and DS's *New Super Mario Bros.* Outlining an August release date, no gameplay specifics were given, but we can see the much-in-vogue Tanooki suit making an appearance. Iwata did disclose his hopes to set a new 2D standard for *Mario* games with the sequel.

INFINITY BLADE: DUNGEONS

Format: iOS
Publisher: Epic Games
Developer: In-house
ETA: September



SET SEVERAL thousand years before the last entry in the series, Epic Games is looking to take advantage of the latest iPad, stating that the definitive iteration of its latest title will be available on Apple's new tablet. Dropping the series' over-the-shoulder viewpoint in favour of a new dynamic camera system, the game now resembles a *Diablo*-esque dungeon crawler more than it does an epic RPG.

BORDERLANDS 2

Format: PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Publisher: 2K Games
Developer: Gearbox Software
ETA: 21 September



FINDING OURSELVES knee-deep in endless viscera is just one by-product of *Borderlands 2*'s escalated action quota. Clearly gunplay is the focus in the sequel, and, as our hands-on time suggests, less time is spent yapping to locals as exploration is used to find more enemies to blast in the face. Whether there's enough variety within to sustain a full RPG campaign is another matter entirely.

POKÉMON DREAM RADAR

Format: 3DS
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: In-house
ETA: September



LAUNCHING LATER in the year alongside *Pokédex Pro*, *Pokémon Dream Radar* is a downloadable 3DS augmented reality app that drops rare Pokémon into the world around you. On its own, it sounds like a mild distraction, but the better news is that Pokémaniacs will be able to take any monsters they catch and transfer them into August's *Pokémon Black Version 2* and its *White* counterpart.

HITMAN: ABSOLUTION

Format: PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: Io Interactive
ETA: November



SQUARE ENIX has cast an eye on the supporting players for 47's next outing. Actors Powers Boothe and Shannyn Sossamon will jump into mo-cap suits, embodying two ICA agents who will represent the big bad. It's also finally been given a release date of 20 November – a commercial graveyard, following one week after *Black Ops 2*. Expect it to slip again to next February, then.

SILENT HUNTER ONLINE

Format: Online
Publisher: Ubisoft
Developer: Blue Byte
ETA: October



UBISOFT HAS announced a browser-based free-to-play multiplayer entry in the *Silent Hunter* franchise. Historically accurate submarines return, with the crux of the game revolving around the Battle of the Atlantic. Interestingly, this will be the first entry in the series to enable co-op throughout the single-player campaign, with individual success impacting players across the world with asynchronous gameplay.

PROJECT X ZONE

Format: 3DS
Publisher: Namco Bandai
Developer: Monolith Soft
ETA: August



IT'S IMPOSSIBLE to conceive how this collaboration came about, but 3DS strategy-RPG *Project X Zone* unites characters from Sega, Namco Bandai and Capcom in a chibi brawl. While there's no sign of exploration gameplay, Namco has released plenty of battle footage, with characters from *Street Fighter*, *Virtual Fighter*, *Shining Force* and the *Tales Of* series working in pairs to complete quests.

STAR TREK

Format: PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Publisher: Namco Bandai
Developer: Digital Extremes
ETA: 2013



FOLLOWING THE success of *The Darkness II*, Digital Extremes has been talking about *Star Trek*, due out later in the year – a bizarre release window given the next movie is another year away. "The time it takes for them to make a good movie is about half of what is needed to make a good game," says Digital Extremes' Steve Sinclair, explaining why it has been in development so long.

SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

GOD OF WAR: ASCENSION

Format: PlayStation 3
Publisher: Sony
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2013



SONY'S REVEAL laid bare the multiplayer in Kratos' next outing, an objective-based affair where two teams of demigod wannabes spam the Square button at one another until one lot wins. In the case we saw, victory involved claiming possession of a titan (in typically brutal fashion) and slaying him (again, horribly) to win the round. games™'s full preview is online at http://bit.ly/IV8f7N

DAMAGE, INC. PACIFIC SQUADRON WWII

Format: PS3, Xbox 360, PC
Publisher: Mad Catz
Developer: In-house
ETA: August



IT'D BE all too easy to label Mad Catz's first foray into development a cynical ploy to shift its new flight stick… so we will. The AV8R controller (see what they did there?) turns out to be the perfect input device for this WWII flight sim, featuring 30-odd solo missions and a bevy of multiplayer modes for those that find themselves tired of land-based conflict. Which, by now, is surely everyone.

SOUL SACRIFICE

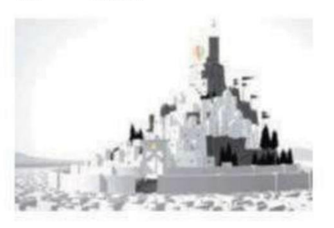
Format: PS Vita
Publisher: Sony
Developer: In-house
ETA: November



IT'S NOT related to Namco Bandai's punishing *Souls* games, but this Vita exclusive has a lot in common with them. Keiji Inafune is planner on this, which features a sorcerer (or a team thereof in multiplayer) taking on foes by offering their own body parts, organs and humanity for power proportional to the sacrifice. Sony didn't waste any time in filling that *Monster Hunter*-shaped hole in the Vita line-up, did it?

THE UNFINISHED SWAN

Format: PS3
Publisher: Sony
Developer: Giant Sparrow
ETA: October



THE PERFECT counterpoint to a market obsessed with men that shoot other men, this curious download-only adventure is about as original as games get. A real sense of exploration and freedom is afforded by the game's opening, where you must explore an incomplete world by lobbing globs of paint around to reveal the missing architecture. Interesting indeed, though clearly not to everyone's tastes.

EX TROOPERS

Format: PS3, 3DS
Publisher: Capcom
Developer: In-house
ETA: September



YOU MIGHT not think it from either the title or the screenshots but *EX Troopers* is actually a new *Lost Planet* game completely seperate from *LP3*. Redesigned with Japan-friendly anime stylings, the surprise spin-off is intended to be a more action-heavy game with simple, arcade-style shooting mechanics. And it's coming to the unusual pairing of PlayStation 3 and 3DS. What?

BEYOND GOOD & EVIL 2

Format: TBC
Publisher: Ubisoft
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2013



IT'S ABOUT time we had another update on Michel Ancel's labour of love, this time the update being that the game is *definitely* not going to arrive on anything less than a next-gen platform. Still, if the longer wait means *BG&E2* is allowed to grow into the sequel it could and should be, it's a hardship we're willing to endure. Just going back to last year's leaked footage reminded us just how excited we were for this.

MOEBIUS

Format: PC, Mac, iPad
Publisher: Pinkerton Road
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2013



JANE JENSEN joins the list of successful Kickstarter fundees, with *Moebius* the first of two games afforded by the recent crowd sourcing windfall. It'll likely fall in line with Jensen's previous works, and its success is important to the startup indie team – it is keen to claim back the *Gabriel Knight* licence and continue work on the franchise, but will only be able to do so if this pair of games proves successful.

GONE HOME

Format: Online
Publisher: The Fullbright Company
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2013



A BUNCH of ex-*BioShock* devs reunite under a new masthead, attempting to offer a similarly original first-person experience to that delivered by *BioShock* but with a slightly more grounded setting and tone. Little is known about the game itself at this time, though the early gameplay teaser makes it out to be a far more puzzle-heavy alternative to Rapture's underwater craziness.



DELAYED – Unannounced EA Game (TBC)

EA recently made the unprecedented move of issuing a statement about the delay into the next financial year of a game that hasn't even been announced yet. The smart money is on *Dragon Age III*, surely…



DELAYED – Darksiders II (Multi)

The second of THQ's horsemen-'em-ups has slipped to August. The extra time will apparently be used for bug fixes and polishing, which can only be a good thing really.

FAMILY GUY: BACK TO THE MULTIVERSE

Format: TBC
Publisher: Activision
Developer: TBC
ETA: September



BASED ON the Road To The Multiverse episode, this return to a digitised Quahog at least has the potential to offer a varied catalogue of settings, alternative takes on characters and other such non-canonical nonsense. The last *Family Guy* game was pretty shocking so hopes aren't exactly high, but it'd be unfair to write it off entirely when we only have a title to go on. After all, it might actually be a little bit funny.

COMPANY OF HEROES 2

Format: PC
Publisher: THQ
Developer: Relic Entertainment
ETA: 2013



THE ORIGINAL is held in high regard by PC gamers, so this sequel is surprising only in that it has taken so long. With *Dawn Of War* developer Relic at the helm, it's safe to assume a level of quality, plus there are improvements across the board – Commander Abilities, environmental destruction and a shift in focus to the eastern front should all help make this the sequel that the original deserves.

GHOST RECON COMMANDER

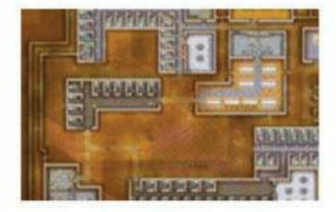
Format: Facebook
Publisher: Ubisoft
Developer: Loot Drop
ETA: June



WELL HERE'S an odd one. Ubisoft has announced that this Facebook *Ghost Recon* game, developed by John Romero's social gaming studio, will unlock goodies for both *Future Soldier* and *Ghost Recon Online* when it launches. The offer of asynchronous multiplayer suggests a turn-based style of play and that, given how much we enjoyed 3DS launch title *Shadow Wars*, is very much okay with us.

PRISON ARCHITECT

Format: PC
Publisher: Introversion
Developer: In-house
ETA: October



THE HOUSE of *Darwinia* returns with what is, in essence, *Theme Prison*. There's none of the levity associated with management games, however – in its place is a fairly grim vibe and some affecting decision-making as you try to balance confinement and execution with cost-effective construction while the game pollutes your mind with inmate backstories and guilt-trip narrative elements.

POKÉMON CONQUEST

Format: DS
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Tecmo Koei
ETA: July



DUE ANY day now, we're actually kinda scared about *Pokémon Conquest*. Not because we're worried it'll be bad – reports based on the Japanese version have been largely positive – but because we already know that a game that combines collectible monsters and SRPG mechanics is guaranteed to rob us of entire weeks. It's okay… it's not like we wanted to play other games anyway.

OUTERNAUTS

Format: Facebook
Publisher: Insomniac Games
Developer: In-house
ETA: August



THE *RATCHET & Clank* team takes a little time out from developing its first non-Sony exclusive console title *Overstrike* to deliver another out-of-character title, this time a social RPG which is being likened to *Pokémon*. Like so many other Facebook games, *Outernauts* offers asynchronous multiplayer, but given the style of gameplay here, it's a far more appealing prospect than most.

NEVERWINTER

Format: PC
Publisher: Perfect World
Developer: Cryptic
ETA: 2013



THE FREE-to-play *D&D* MMO went down a storm at PAX – surprising since last time we saw the game it was something else entirely. With cooperative play now expanded into massively multiplayer territory and a new publisher (which, as it happens, is pretty well established in free-to-play MMOs), this action-heavy twist on dice rolls and co-op questing just got interesting all over again.

ADVENTURE TIME

Format: 3DS, DS
Publisher: D3 Publisher
Developer: WayForward Technologies
ETA: October



When we found out about *Adventure Time: HEY ICE King! Why'd You Steal Our Garbage?!*, we kicked ourselves for not having discovered it sooner – the quirky cartoon is, as the image above makes clear, pretty much the best thing ever. And with WayForward on hand to deliver a pair of portable titles, we're presented with that rarest of beasts: a cartoon tie-in that we actually might consider playing.

Valve's Secret Steam Console

The facts, the mounting evidence, and the potential behind the secret project that could radically change the videogames landscape forever

>> **Valve does a** great many things with magnificent aplomb but taking orders isn't one of them. In fact, figures of authority have been painted as untrustworthy throughout Valve's works: there's G-Man's cryptic demands imposed on a lowly scientist; the ubiquitous presence of a maniacal AI struggling to control its subjects; and even the feckless mumblings of a corporate CEO constantly fumbling while governing a corporation. But Valve itself appears different.

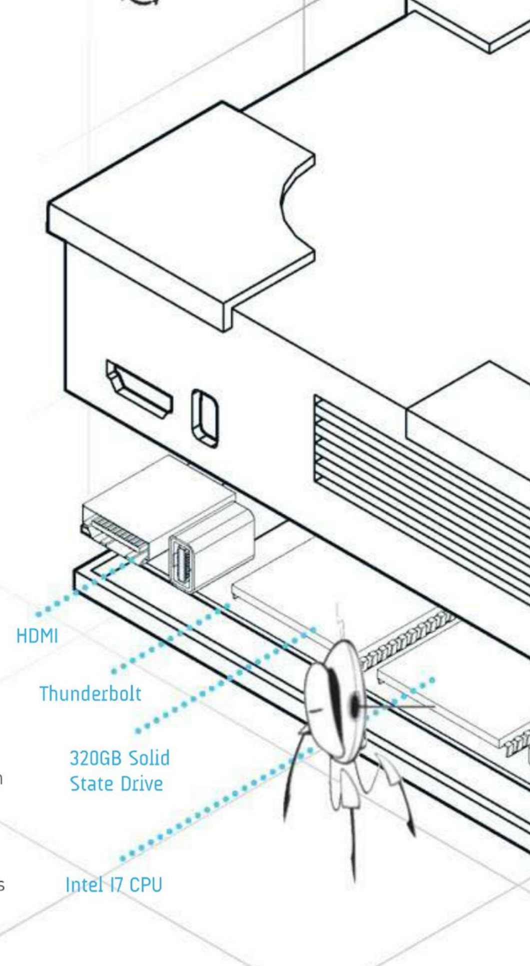
Flat management isn't a term you come across often in the workplace. The idea being that an establishment is operated with zero hierarchy; staff members treated on an even keel, valued equally in an 'all for one and one for all' style mantra – watch any of the staff credit sequences in Valve games and you'll find no job titles. Valve's adoption of this organisational configuration has recently become a huge talking point.

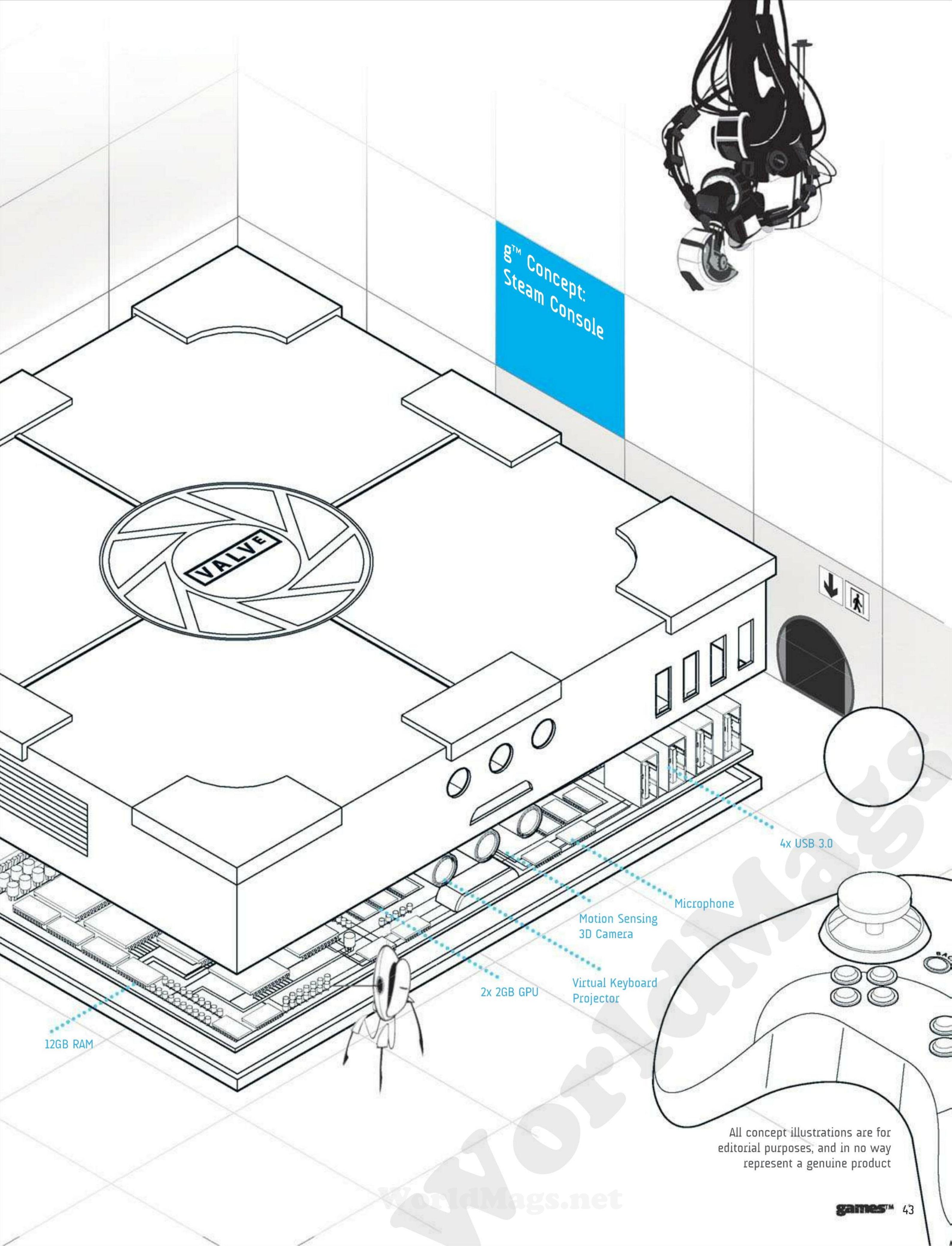
But let's get one thing straight: Gabe Newell is most definitely the boss. Definitely. He has an intimidating office adorned with very pointy knives, overlooking the volcanic mountaintops on the periphery of the Bellevue studio location. But the truth is, he's not usually in there. He can be found on one of the several other floors of Valve's HQ, lending a hand, filling in production gaps and offering advice to the various teams across numerous projects.

It all started when two former Microsoft employees, Mike Harrington and Gabe Newell, founded Valve Corporation in 1996. They decided to create a studio that would drastically differ from the intense pressures and rigid structure of a traditional development house (borne from, as Newell discovered when researching, a long-established draconian and archaic leadership practice from a military age). What they formed was a partnership of individuals given the freedom to create, innovate and prosper within a nurturing creative environment, the details of which, surprisingly have only recently come to light as the pages of the Valve Employee Handbook have spilled forth online. Valve's David Sawyer describes the handbooks as "an accurate view of how Valve works." It casts a light on the company's unique practices, and its unwavering internal commitment to quality and community, not to mention fostering an atmosphere without which the company couldn't have conceived its most revered work – it would lead to the overwhelming success of Valve's very first product, *Half-Life*.

However, its triumphant critical and commercial reception wouldn't be the only aspect of *Half-Life* to be replicated throughout the studio's history. Lest we forget, Gordon Freeman's debut missed its release window by a full year (giving birth to the term 'Valve Time', the expanded time it takes Valve to fully complete a project – roughly between two and six times whatever the proposed development window is) as the studio went back to the drawing board after internal testing yielded inadequate results. Fifteen years later, Freeman is late to work again.

Half-Life 3 (or *Half-Life 2: Episode Three* if you're still clinging to that notion) is a dead cert, at one point officially announced for a Christmas 2007 release before entering a perpetual radio silence ever since. It's also no stretch of the imagination to presuppose that *Half-Life 3*'s story will intertwine with the *Portal* universe, the sequel to the latter having made numerous references to Black Mesa and the Borealis – the ship Gordon Freeman sets off to discover at the conclusion of *Half-Life 2: Episode Two*. >>





All concept illustrations are for editorial purposes, and in no way represent a genuine product

In defence of Dota 2

Valve's Defense Of The Ancients sequel might seem like a niche game for the die-hards, but its innovations could have wider repercussions for both Valve's games and Steam itself

EVERYONE PLAYS *DOTA* at Valve. So obsessed had Newell and fellow Valve veterans Robin Walker, Adrian Finol and Erik Johnson become that they invited developer IceFrog for a tour around Valve's offices. In another case of plucking talent on instinct, he turned up to the studio and Newell hired him on the spot. It was a canny move on Newell's part; *DOTA* is more of a community game than any of Valve's previous endeavours, and a genre we're surprised it has taken this long for the studio to dip its toes into. Fundamentally, it's a strategic RPG (originally a *Warcraft III* mod) that has a hardcore, almost elitist community of competitive players. However, Valve is aiming to broaden its reach with the sequel, instigating a free-to-play model (which *Team Fortress 2* recently transitioned over to). Newell spoke at length how he foresees this working – albeit in his usual evasive manner. While no monetary specifics were discussed, he instead proposed that players would be rewarded by how they contribute to the community – whether by coaching others, creating content or being particularly proficient in one skillset. It's an interesting twist for the genre but may prove essential in its success, as it will find itself in direct competition with the phenomenally successful *League Of Legends*. It's also an idea that Newell predicts will spread across Steam, influencing other products, such as *Team Fortress 2* and third-party titles such as *Skyrim*. *Dota 2* may just be the first step in expanding the community spirit, and the next step in player achievements.



Ergonomic avatar guidance vestibule

Auto-Order Pizza Button

Moisture-ardent Biometric sensor grip

Button

g™ Concept: Valve Contoller

>> But while Valve's catalogue has always laid colourful, fan-baiting Easter eggs to signpost future instalments of popular franchises, the biggest clue to the studio's future intentions has apparently been running in the background for several years.

In the decade since Steam was released, the client has successfully evolved from a social platform, anti-piracy aid and indie game distributor to the market leader in digital PC gaming. Take a closer look at the recent enhancements, however, and it's indicative of a refocused outlook for the client: remote access is set to improve usability; new Steam Vouchers shifting the platform further into commercial gaze; and the long-awaited **Big Picture mode** making the PC and console gaming homogenous in the living space – facilitating the use of Steam on TVs. It all gives credence to the suggestion that Valve is making a move into the console marketplace.

"If we have to sell hardware we will," Newell stated to Penny Arcade in an interview earlier in the year. "We have no reason to believe we're any good at it; it's more we think that we need to continue to have innovation, and if the only way to get these kind of projects started is by us going and developing and selling the hardware directly then that's what we'll do."

We already know that Valve was considering hardware as far back as 2009, when *Portal* designer Kim Swift was still at the studio. "I wish Valve all the best with that and I think they would do incredibly well," she tells **games™**. "I remember people talking about Valve hardware when I was still there."

"Just look at how far Steam has come," Swift argues in favour of a Valve console. "When it started it was nothing and now it's huge. You can buy almost any game, even really old games. So I think if they made that into a console then it would be extremely successful."

The idea of a Steam Box is indicative of the industry's push into the digital domain, with

"The idea of a Steam Box is indicative of the industry's push into the digital domain"



USB input for extra control interface sell-through opportunities





Steam at the forefront of this movement. Analysts currently evaluate Steam as having 70 per cent of the market share of digital distribution on PC and Mac, and the distribution platform made between $300 million and $400 million for Valve in 2010 (with a 200 per cent year-on-year growth significantly bolstering those numbers for 2011). Likewise, as physical retail sales continue to decline, EA is reaping the benefits of the digital age: combined Origin and digital software sales (including DLC) have earned EA an impressive $1.2 billion haul in the last year. CEO John Riccitiello mirrors Valve's belief that the industry is moving into a prosperous digital age. "It's a good time to be at EA. We're well on the way to having transformed our business model. We've changed from Tower Records to iTunes, from Sears to Amazon."

So what would a Steam console, aka the Steam Box, look like? There might be a clue in what appears to be an early prototype that found its way online in March. Valve employee Greg Coomer tweeted: "Built this **tiny PC. i7 quad core, 8GB ram, Zotac Z-68 mobo w/ onnboard (sic) Nvidia mobile gfx. Runs *Portal 2* FAST**." It appeared with a photo of a modest white box, and arrived just a day after sources claimed Valve was working on a new console, citing specs that lined up with Coomer's project.

This is what is being theorised as a unified console standard for Valve's hardware, creating a console strategy more akin to that of 3DO or MSX than current gaming machines – wherein Valve would provide the software and set the spec for hardware manufacturers to build around. Sources claim that Valve was using this setup to showcase the potential of the Steam Box at CES this year, inviting select hardware partners such as Dell and Alienware to view the product in action. It's an attractive prospect, with benefits including reduced licensing and royalty fees for publishers – an incredibly intelligent decision when retail is facing a downward spiral.

The 3DO and MSX had a lot of these benefits of course, and both infamously tanked like a cruise liner in the arctic, but Valve is approaching the prospect with a much savvier attitude. The Steam Box would effectively place a competitively priced PC under your television set, running an enhanced version of Steam that would enable owners to access a vast catalogue of games on demand (old and new) – in fact, rumours persist that the recently-released **Alienware X51** may have been designed with this spec in mind, and will retroactively upgrade to the software on announcement. And you never know, if Valve should decide to take on the big guns, it may just have a killer app in the form of a *Half-Life* sequel.

Moving Steam outside of the enthusiast market and turning it into a commercially viable device isn't as simple as it sounds (a fact OnLive can testify to). Today's consumers expect >>

Where Is Half-Life 3?

Valve's most revered franchise is long overdue a new instalment, after years of unfulfilled promises. So when can we expect to see Gordon Freeman rise again?



"When we announce *Half-Life 3* it won't be on a T-shirt or a forum or some obscure internet game," chuckles Chet Faliszek. "We'll do it in our own way." Faliszek is wrong to some degree. Valve *did* announce *Half-Life 3*, or rather what it was initially intended to be *Half-Life 2: Episode Three*. Due for release Christmas 2007, Valve has remained vigilant in its silence over the several years since the announcement as gamers wait impatiently for a conclusion to *Episode Two*'s cliffhanger ending.

Talking to *Portal* co-creator Kim Swift, we ask if she knows why *Half-Life 2: Episode Three* hasn't materialised, and her answer is teasing. "Yes, in fact I do, but I'm not going to tell you anything. It's definitely not my place to say and you should probably ask Valve that one."

So that's exactly what we did…

"I think there are still a lot of interesting ideas in terms of crossover that we know we want to explore," says Jeep Barnett, one of the DigiPen alumni whose project *Narbacular Drop* earned him a place at Valve. "The *Half-Life* universe is so deep and so involved and kind of puzzling – there's a lot of elements that tie together in unusual ways. *Portal* is just a piece of that, which provides interesting angles of that same universe. But there are going to be more crossovers."

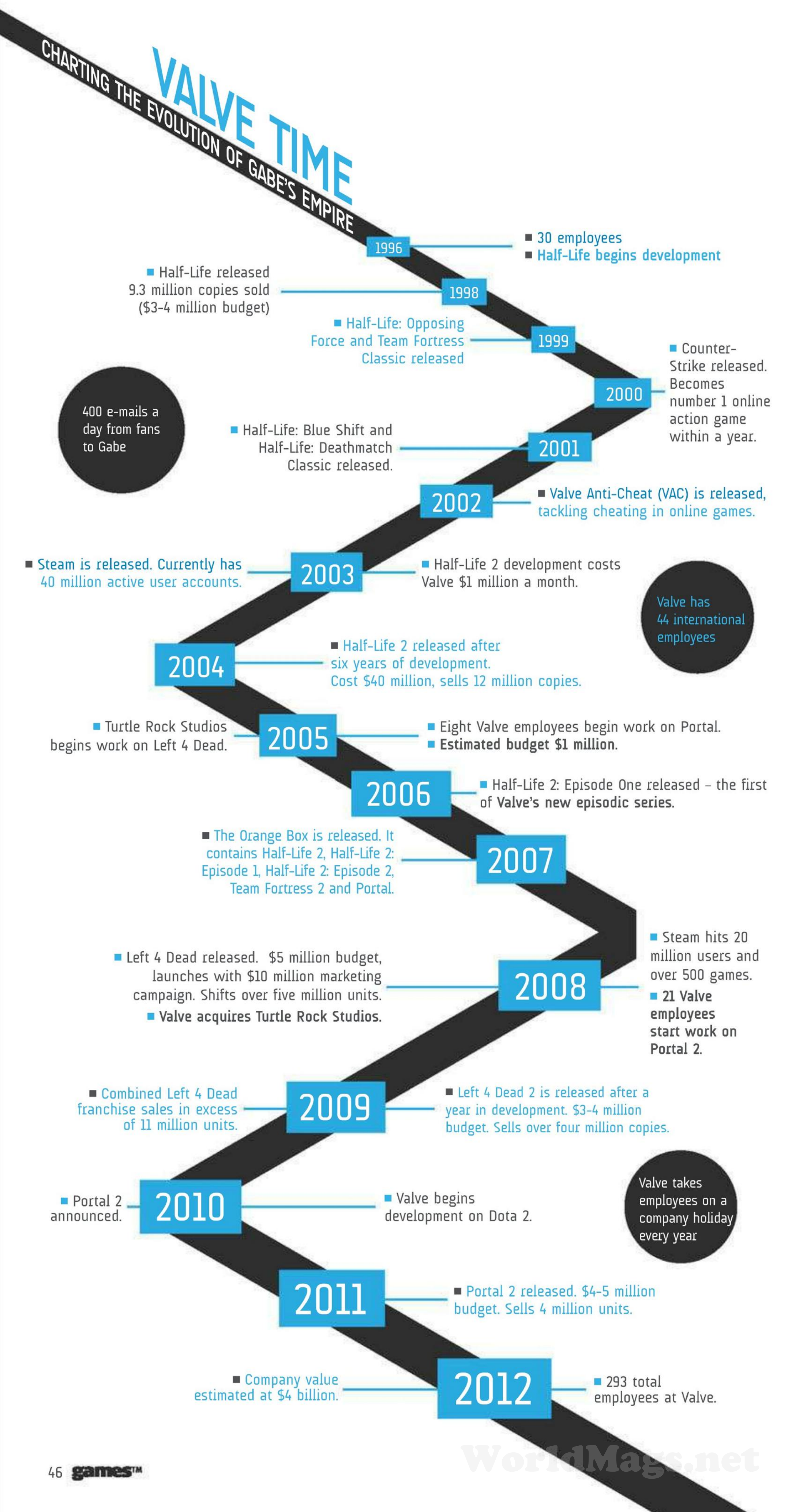
Portal 2 contained many cryptic clues relating to *Half-Life 3*'s narrative. The most significant discovery within is the ship Borealis, lying dormant at the very bottom of Aperture Laboratories during the second half of the game's single-player campaign. The ship is a crucial narrative thread, spoken of in *Half-Life 2: Episode Two* as being located in the arctic and holding a very important piece of technology that will save the world – that'll be the portal gun, we suppose.

"There are a lot of things that we have planned," Barnett alludes. "There are definitely things we plan ahead but we change things in reaction to the new ideas for the games that we come up with, as well as things like what the community fully understands and the things that they are still puzzling about."

Valve has stated in the past that Gordon Freeman will not be heading back to City 17 in the next installment; instead the likely location will be the Arctic, where he and Alyx go on the search for the aforementioned Borealis. And what of Alyx – Gordon's ever-faithful companion? Well, she may play an even more integral part in the next installment than expected, with sources claiming a cooperative strand to the single-player, in a similar vein to *Portal 2*'s co-op campaign, will feature heavily.

Speculation has reached supernova levels recently, with T-shirts, fake ARGs, hidden files and even a joke in May's *Portal 2* DLC all pointing toward an imminent announcement. With the universe of two of Valve's biggest franchises so closely knitted together, the possibilities of where the next chapter will take us are mind-boggling.





>> innovations with a new generation and one facet of this is the patent Valve filed last year for a gaming controller – the USP of which would be interchangeable components, enabling gamers to swap thumbsticks for a track ball or other intuitive methods of control depending on the game genre.

You'd be forgiven for thinking that Valve is trying to muscle in on the territory of Microsoft, Sony and Nintendo, but the truth is any console movement on Valve's front is more likely a strategic reaction to increasingly closed platforms, such as Apple's iOS. Speaking with The Seattle Times, Newell outlined his fears for the future of gaming. "On the platform side, it's sort of ominous that the world seems to be moving away from open platforms," he exclaimed. "I consider Apple to be very closed. Let's say you have a book business and you are charging five to seven per cent gross margins. You can't exist in an Apple world, because they want 30 per cent and they don't care that you only have seven per cent to play with."

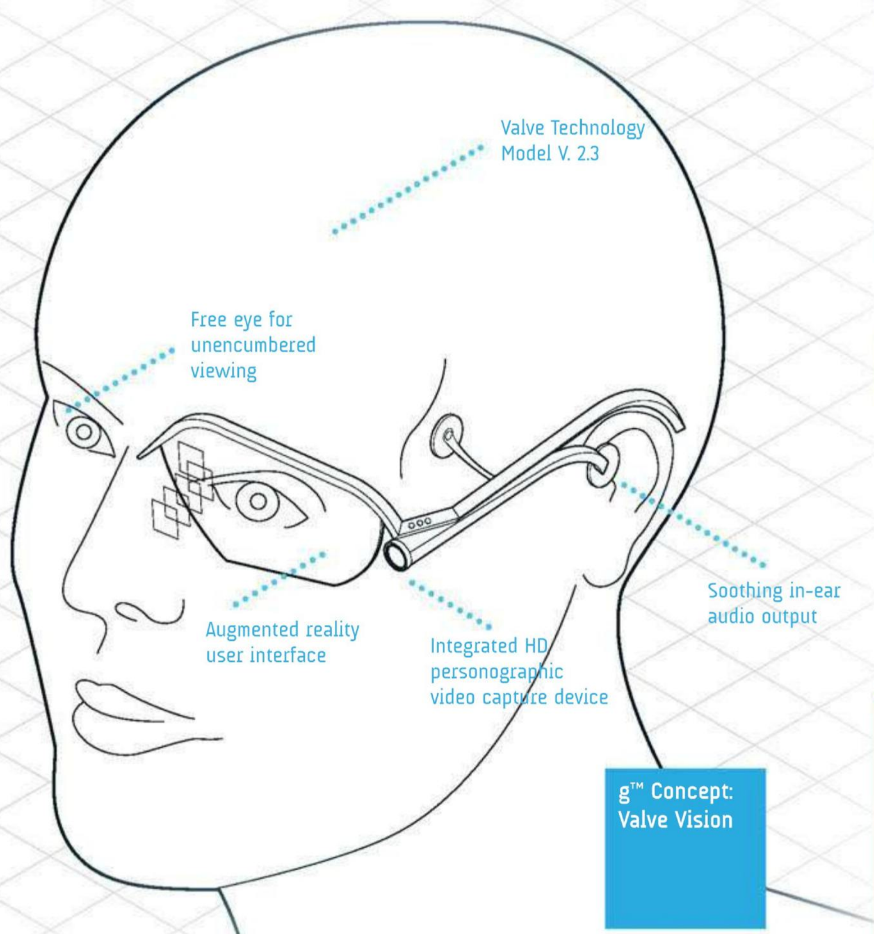
Furthermore, Newell is mindful of how Apple has capitalised on mobile gaming, and views the expansion of Steam as very much an on-the-go service. "When you look at how powerful those [mobile] systems are getting, versus how much content we have – we have nothing on the iPhone, Android or Windows Mobile," Newell said. "That's a huge hole for us."

Valve isn't just looking at producing an alternative to the current generation of consoles, but an all-out comprehensive distribution service that will cater to the evolving, shifting tastes of the contemporary gamer. In short: it could be all-out war between Valve and Apple.

For a company that doesn't value individual staff roles, Valve's job listings showcase some very specific skillsets for certain sectors it wishes to expand, one of which sheds some light on the future machinations of the otherwise cagey developer. A posting for an Electronics Engineer vacancy on Valve's website paints in no uncertain terms that the company is working on new hardware. "For years, Valve has been all about writing software that provides great gameplay experiences," the post reads. "Now we're developing hardware to enhance those experiences, and you can be a key part of making that happen."

"We're not talking about me-too mice and gamepads here – help us invent whole new gaming experiences," it adds, inviting applicants to join a "highly motivated team that's doing hardware design, prototyping, testing, and production across a wide range of platforms."

But enhancing gaming experiences isn't necessarily restricted to creating a new console. Ex-id employee and industry luminary Michael Abrash – who joined old friend Gabe Newell at



"Imagine billboards displaying products relating to your likes, a satnav mapping your journey over the environment you're walking across"

Valve in 2011 – started talking candidly about his experiences at the company since joining, on his Valve blog. Abrash sings the praises of the flat management system: "Valve's long string of successes, many of them genuinely groundbreaking, is strong evidence that the hypothesis that creative people are the key to success is in fact correct, and that the structuring of Valve around those people has been successful," he says in his blog. "And, almost by definition, it's a great place for the right sort of creative people to work."

Since joining the studio, Abrash has had creative freedom to work on a passion project of his: wearable computers. "By 'wearable computing' I mean mobile computing where both computer-generated graphics and the real world are seamlessly overlaid in your view; there is no separate display that you hold in your hands (think Terminator vision)," Abrash explains in his debut blog post. "The underlying trend as we've gone from desktops through laptops and notebooks to tablets is one of having computing available in more places, more of the time. The logical endpoint is computing everywhere, all the time."

If it all sounds familiar, then what Abash and his small R&D team at Valve are working on is similar to Google's recent announcement – Project Glass. The core idea behind the tech is that a small wearable screen can interact with the environment and influence day-to-day lives on an immense scale. Imagine billboards displaying products relating to your likes, a satnav mapping your journey over the environment you're walking across, and even playing a spot of *AR Quake* while sipping a coffee in the park. For Abash and his team, these are just a few of the applications that could be explored with such a device.

"The Valve approach is to do experiments and see what we learn – failure is fine, just so long as we can identify failure quickly, learn from it, and move on – and then apply it to the next experiment," he writes. "The process is very fast-moving and iterative, and we're just at the start. How far and where the investigation goes depends on what we learn."

But more direct technological innovations that relate to gaming are also on the horizon for Valve, implementing biometric tech into new >>



BEHIND THE SCENES

COUNTER-STRIKE: GLOBAL OFFENSIVE

Valve founder Chet Faliszek details the process of updating the developer's most hardcore FPS for a new generation

How did you settle on new game mode Arsenal for *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*?
If you've ever played Gun Game on PC, Arsenal mode is based on that. We're actually working with the Gun Game mod guys. I think in *Counter-Strike: Source* right now 20 or 30 per cent of all player minutes are played in Gun Game. We were like, 'Well, it's stupid not to bring that over.' We wanted to embrace that.

***Counter-Strike* has made its way to consoles before but wasn't massively successful. What was the decision behind trying again?**
I think partially it's because we all play games. We are PC focused be we still play a lot of console games. We were looking for a game that does what this does. It's about competition, something clean, something simple yet very addictive. We see that internally in our office and it quickly turns from playing de_dust for 30 minutes to it being a two-hour session and we have to say, 'Okay guys, time to get back to work.'

Did it start development as a simple port of *Counter-Strike: Source* or was it always intended to be a new, enhanced version?
We started updating *Counter-Strike: Source* and we wondered what that would look like porting it. And then we were like 'well, you know what? There's a bunch of things that we want to do in this port.' We didn't want to break the *CSS* guys' game – that was really important to us. The *1.6* and *CSS* guys, that game still exists for them and they can go back and play it – we're not trying to destroy that. What we are going to do is bring what we think are the best elements of those into what we think is the best version of *Counter-Strike*.

Have you seen any difference between how the *1.6* and *CSS* community has reacted to the changes?
No, they're pretty similar. There's a couple of things about feel of recoil and the damage something does, but they're pretty close. Really, I think for both games we did a really lousy job of engaging the community. We finished and we did these things without talking to them as closely as we are this time. This time we made a real effort to engage them and addressing what their concerns are. The community itself is awesome and we want to make sure we're constantly supporting them.

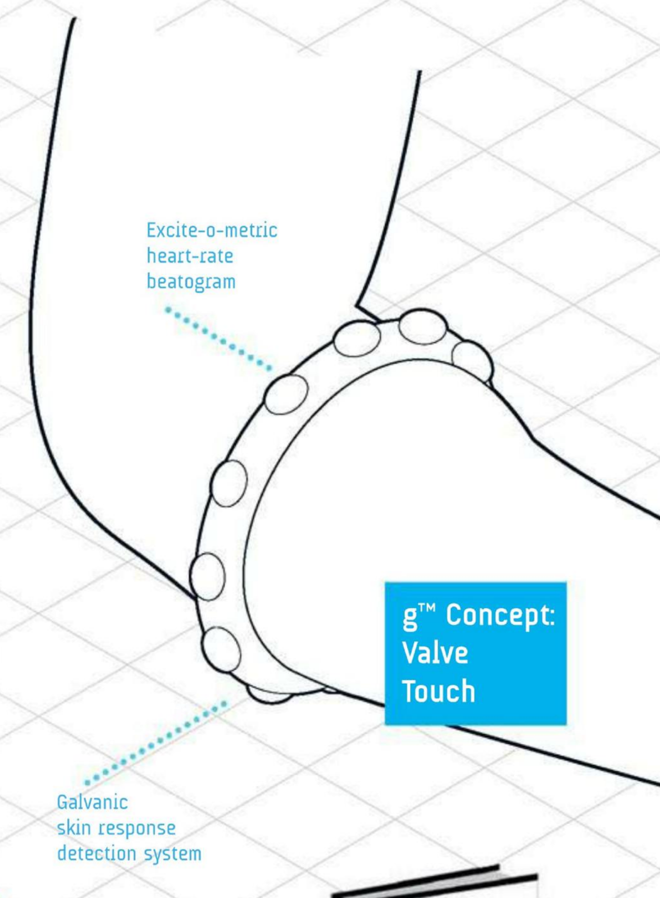
>> hardware. Newell himself, in his interview with Penny Arcade, expanded on what particular advancements he is testing, though he clearly fumbles around the major details. "We're trying to get the experiments we've been doing in – you know, we did a ton of work on biofeedback, on biometrics, and that'll, you know... from our point of view we were like, 'Okay, this is all sort of proven out', and we're just sort of scratching our heads trying to figure out the best way to get that hardware out to customers without something where we'd just say, 'Okay, this works.' it's not a question of whether or not this is going to be useful for customers, whether or not it's going to be useful for content developers. You know, it's figuring out the best way we can get these into people's hands."

Valve has been using biometric data to monitor the emotional response of gamers during internal testing for a number of years, and sources currently claim that they are looking to implement this technology into a new device. With a wristband/bracelet, the Steam Box would be able to monitor pulse and galvanic skin response, the gameplay implications of which could involve a virtual world that reacts to your heightened levels of excitement, fear and anger.

It seems a natural evolution of the current industry state and a believable progression of the current motion control demand (emotion control?) that has every potential to galvanise the industry and consumers in much the same way as the Wii. This wouldn't just put Valve in an advantageous position with the future of the videogames industry, but would also put the studio in competition with technological innovators such as Google, Apple and Facebook.

Valve understands the need to push the industry forward at a time when consumer interest in consoles is waning and gaming trends continue to shift towards immediate and accessible means to access games – not to mention the fact that a lack of genuine innovation has left hardware and software sales tepid. In the Steam Box, Valve could provide not only the logical leap towards a fully digital future but also an evolutionary step to the next era of digital interactivity.

In tried-and-true Valve tradition, no one is quite sure when to expect the developer to lift the veil on its latest wonder. Valve Time ticks onwards, the community is left waiting for whatever the illustrious studio has stored up its sleeve, and no amount of leaks, supposition and media pressure will command them to announce it any sooner. After all, Valve may be good at a large number of things (and hardware design may be the latest addition to the roster), but taking orders isn't one of them.



10 THINGS WE'VE LEARNED ABOUT VALVE FROM ITS HANDBOOK FOR NEW EMPLOYEES

Valve's leaked handbook detailed the inner workings of one of the most enigmatic and successful independent studios in the industry. **games™** selects some of the book's most revealing facts

VALVE
HANDBOOK FOR NEW EMPLOYEES

1 WHY THE ONLY BOSS IS THE CUSTOMER

Hierarchy is a dirty word at Valve's Bellevue offices. In an interesting antithesis to a traditional corporate management structure, Valve prefers employees to choose what they want to work on and their role. No one is the boss and everyone embarks on projects *they* feel passionate about, rather than being pigeonholed on *Generic Blaster 4*. It's a potentially intimidating prospect but it provides an antidote to predictability and repetition, and is indicative of a strong work ethic and unfettered enthusiasm. This methodology has been essential to the company's continued subversive, masterful and ingenious approach to videogame design.

2 CREATING GREAT GAMES ISN'T A NINE-TO-FIVE GRIND

The day-to-day office life is quite relaxed by most company standards. Actually, luxurious would be a more appropriate expression. There are various recreational facilities available for Valve employees to grab some downtime. You can snatch some fresh food in the kitchen, hit the gym, play some darts and have a massage. Every facet of the company's structure nurtures the creative spirit of each member of staff.

3 NO ONE IS HIRED FOR JUST ONE JOB

If you're a particularly great coder or a dab-hand at making custom hats and feel Valve is the place for you, then it might come as a bit of a shock that nobody is hired based on a singular skill. While a specific discipline may be an integral part of a specific position at the company, Valve employs a range of people who can function across multiple skills – or at least present the aptitude and will to explore new areas of game design.

4 VALVE ISN'T ALL SWEETNESS AND LIGHT

One area of the Valve handbook that may have gone unnoticed by the majority of readers is the small print located at the front of the document. "Either Valve or an employee can terminate the employment relationship at any time, with or without cause, with or without notice." It's the dark underbelly of an otherwise ebullient company document: employees can be deemed expendable at any moment.

5 NOBODY REALLY KNOWS WHAT GABE NEWELL DOES

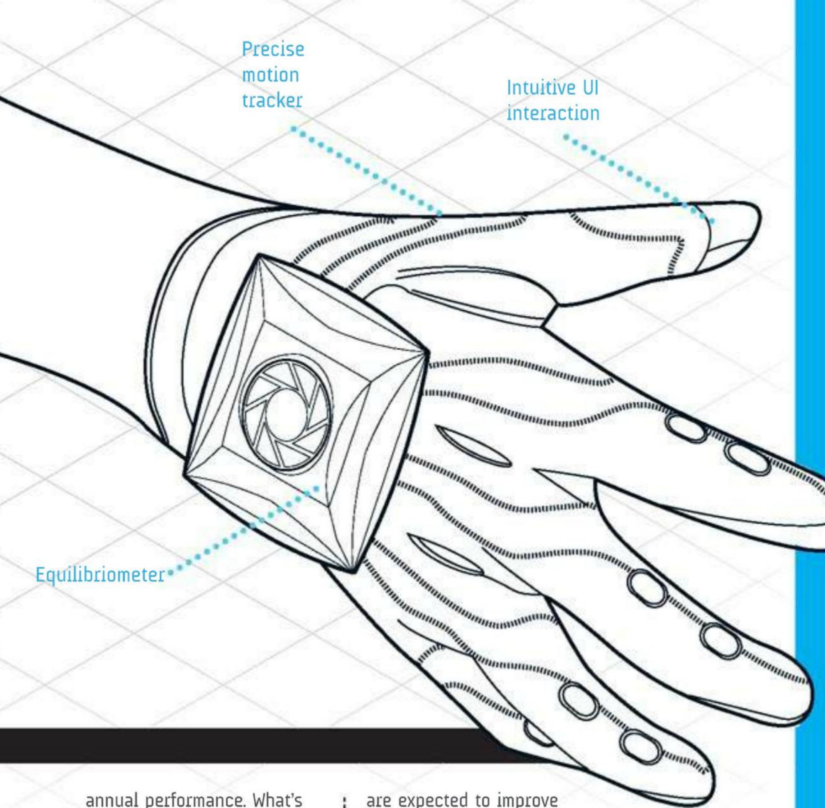
Given the lack of managerial structuring inside Valve, Gabe Newell (co-founder of the studio) isn't mentioned an awful lot. When he is, it's either expressing his philanthropic devotion to his employees or in some well-meaning jibe at his expense. He collects knives, in case you didn't know.

6 DESKS WITH WHEELS MAKE VALVE BRILLIANT

The desks at Valve have wheels. It's a small note among the 56 pages of introductory practices, company procedures and general housekeeping but it's one that epitomises the core ethos at Valve. These are independent spirits, and anyone can up and move their station at any time to either move onto a new project or just get a better point of view.

7 VALVE COLLEAGUES DETERMINE EACH OTHER'S SALARY

Each year a few randomly selected employees are chosen to assess the other members of staff about their



annual performance. What's interesting is that Valve ranks each staff member based on how they are performing in four equally vital categories of importance. Every member of staff is interviewed about those they've worked with and this data is then used to adjust a staff member's wage to be 'correct', suggesting to us that wages can go down as well as up.

8 CAREER PROGRESSION IN VALVE IS FAR FROM SIMPLE

As nobody seemingly has a prescribed job title and everyone is free to swap projects and join new teams, it's clear that career progression within the company is difficult to summarise. Employees are expected to improve organically, strive to learn new skills and develop in a non-traditional sense. Ultimately, everyone is progressing on a daily basis.

9 VALVE LAUNCHES GAMES WHEN VALVE IS READY (WHICH WE ALREADY KNEW, TO BE HONEST)

As detailed through the handbook's timeline, Valve has delayed and cancelled games, all because it only releases a game when it deems it ready to ship. This is the benefit of Valve owning all of its IP and working outside of a publisher's strict regime.

10 IS VALVE THE BEST PLACE IN THE WORLD TO WORK?

Yes, probably.



BEHIND THE SCENES

PORTAL 2: PERPETUAL TESTING INITIATIVE

With 35,000 new levels created in its first week, Portal 2's free level editor is another triumph for Valve. Designer David Sawyer explains the creative process behind the project

What challenges did you face when transforming the level creation tools into a simple and intuitive interface for players?
We wanted the Puzzle Maker to be more than just easy to use. We wanted to actually make it entertaining to use. We wanted to embed it into the game itself, wrap it in the fiction of *Portal 2*, and let everyone experience it as a core piece of *Portal 2* and not just a power tool. We approached this in the same way we did *Portal 2*: we built prototypes to test our ideas and sat a lot of people down to see how they actually used it. Though our core ideas mostly held up along the way, there were many instances of having to reevaluate some particular idea or approach because of playtester feedback. We spent a lot of time refining presentation and UI interactions so that the editor always acts the way the user expects. The specific problems were very different than making a game like *Portal 2*, but the process was ultimately very similar.

How in-depth do you foresee the community getting with the level editor?
We expect to see an incredible number and variety of community-made puzzles. We've barely scratched the surface of puzzle possibilities in our own maps, and we think the Puzzle Maker and the Workshop is going to make *Portal 2* nearly infinitely replayable.

How did you land on the isometric style of the editor? Was it due to simplicity or did you want to retain the signature style of the vignettes present since the first *Portal*?

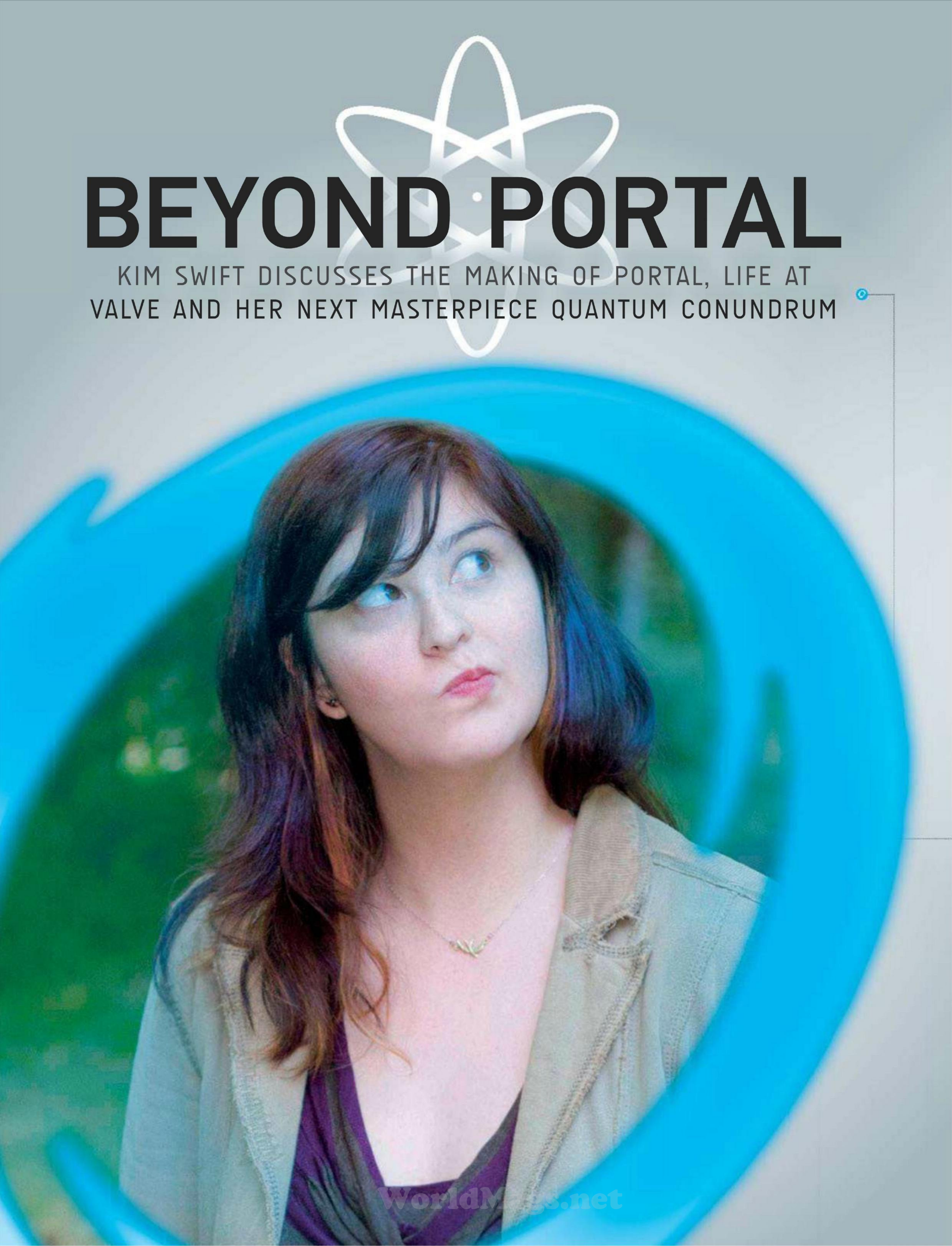
Both of those aspects factored heavily into our choice of visual style for the Puzzle Maker. We wanted the editor to be part of the fiction and live within the *Portal 2* universe, so the infographic style was a natural choice. The clean, simple visuals also serve to keep the focus on puzzle mechanics and interactions. The result is a very pure, powerful puzzle design tool that's also entertaining to use. It feels more like playing a game than using a tool.

Is the technology of this DLC limited only to *Portal*, or have you built it with other/future Valve products in mind?
The Steam Workshop is a built-in component of the Steamworks package available to any game developer. Everything *Portal 2* does with the Steam Workshop, other games can do too – *Skyrim* has been using the Steam Workshop for just a few months and has already clocked in at over 13 million downloads of user-made content. We're hoping that the ease and power of the Steam Workshop will encourage more companies to tap into their incredibly creative player bases.

There's been a lot of discussion about Valve's management style since the handbook was leaked online. How has the unique structure of Valve enabled you to work on an unusual project like the *Portal 2* DLC?
This project is a great illustration of the benefits of Valve's structure. It started with a small handful of people who were enthusiastic about the idea. They built a prototype, proved the concept, and before long enough people had signed on to make it a reality. No one had to greenlight the project. It was real as soon as we had enough people to build it.

BEYOND PORTAL

KIM SWIFT DISCUSSES THE MAKING OF PORTAL, LIFE AT VALVE AND HER NEXT MASTERPIECE QUANTUM CONUNDRUM





Portal co-creator Kim Swift passed up the chance to work on its sequel to help create the incredible Left 4 Dead, and has since departed Valve entirely to make her own spiritual successor to Portal in this year's Quantum Conundrum. In a rare interview, **games™** speaks to Swift about her explosive career, and just what it's like within the walls of Valve

Completed a Valve game lately? If you have then you might notice the unique way in which the company decides to structure the credits for each of its titles. What follows the final scene of each game is a simple alphabetical list of everyone employed at the company during the time of its publication. No hierarchy is implied, no job title is given, no role defined and no one person is given more credit for a project than another.

It's certainly an admirable trait – an egalitarian acknowledgement that the contributions of a group are always greater than the sum of their parts. But it also shies away from the logical fact that some people just do contribute more than others. Take Kim Swift, for example. She's credited on the irrefutable masterpiece that is *Half-Life 2: Episode Two* but in reality, she tells us, "I didn't really work on it; I was just asked to come in and test the game one day"

Likewise, as the woman credited with creating incredible genre-busting puzzler *Portal*, is Swift really the most important figure within its team? After all, Swift is one of four students hired by Valve to make *Portal*, and that small team was aided by a whole group of games industry professionals once they joined the company. It's difficult to know exactly where the genius comes from. Or at least it would be were it not for *Quantum Conundrum*.

Swift's first game since leaving Valve in 2009, *Quantum Conundrum* is developed by Airtight Games – the studio that brought you the distinctly six-out-of-ten *Dark Void* – and on first impressions stands to be every bit as clever and confounding as the original *Portal*. It might not use the same game mechanic but its dimension-switching gameplay, in which the physics of a room can be transformed in four individual ways in cooperation with each other, is proof that there's definitely a level of mind boggling mayhem going on in Kim Swift's mind.

It's no wonder that Swift has a penchant for state-altering puzzle adventures. She was basically

weaned on them. Born in 1983, Swift grew up in the Nintendo generation and cut her teeth on the Super NES during high school. "I played with my Dad. We'd assign the controller back and forth to each other and I fell in love with it," remembers Swift, who speaks highly of game's immersive world and ambitious puzzle mechanics. It doesn't take a genius to see how Miyamoto's locked room puzzles and amazing light world/dark world mechanic might have influenced not just *Quantum Conundrum* also Swift's first proper game, the student project that landed her a job *Narbacular Drop*.

After leaving school, Swift enrolled in the DigiPen Institute of Technology, a renowned university specialising in computer science, with multiple courses dedicated to game design taught by industry professionals. There she joined up with fellow students Jeep Barnett, Dave Kircher and Garret Rickey to develop *Narbacular Drop* – a genius new first-person puzzler involving the use of magical doorways to move between unreachable parts of each room.

Narbacular Drop was a combination of a few factors", says Swift. "Dave Kircher actually came up with the initial tech for the visuals of the portals; being able to see in one and out the other. Jeep Barnett and I both had ideas for games and decided to take components of each along with the portal tech and came up with the concept of an environmental puzzle game."

It was student project *Narbacular Drop* that got Kim Swift noticed by Valve, and inevitably led to the creation of *Portal*



Narbacular Drop may have been a student project but it featured a central premise that went way beyond those of most commercial games, and soon started turning heads. Winning several finalist places at independent games festivals in 2006, it caught the attention of PC gamers who downloaded the game from DigiPen's website and embraced it as *the* great indie release of the year. Meanwhile, it also caught the attention of Valve Software. At a DigiPen career day, the *Narbacular Drop* team showed off its game to members of the industry and left an impression on *Team Fortress* creator Robin Walker, who acknowledged the brilliance of the idea but said that the visual style looked too much like *Quake*, which was a creaky ten years old at that point.

Weeks later, Swift convinced Garret Rickey to send Walker an email asking for more feedback. To their surprise, Walker invited the team to demonstrate the game further at the Valve offices, leading to a fateful meeting that would change both the team's life and the fate of Valve itself. "We initially went there thinking that we were just going to be getting feedback on *Narbacular Drop* before we submitted it to GDC's student showcase", says Swift. "Robin Walker hosted us and we figured there'd be a couple of folks checking our game out, but there ended up being around twenty people crammed in the conference room with us. We presented the game, and about fifteen minutes later Gabe stopped us and asked what we were doing after we graduated, to which I replied, 'Hopefully, getting jobs.'"

It was a bold thing to say but it paid off. "Next thing we know, we're being offered the opportunity to remake our student project using the Source engine at Valve. I couldn't believe it," Swift remembers. "When we left we just stood outside in the courtyard of the building in complete silence with our mouths agape for quite a while."

The Source remake of *Narbacular Drop* eventually became *Portal*, of course. Taking the the core idea of *Narbacular Drop*, it changed the setting from muddy brown dungeons to a clinical futuristic lab setting and was spruced up by Valve's in-house engine. The gameplay mechanic was already genius, but the addition of an exciting escape plot, a maniacal AI tormentor and one of the funniest scripts to ever feature in a game took it to the next level, and arguably surpassed even *Half-Life 2* as Valve's greatest achievement at that point.

What did Valve add to the production that the student team would have struggled to achieve alone? "Well the most important difference is that Valve has lots of money," answers Swift. "So there's lots of time to iterate. In fact, we were helped by the fact that *Portal* was due to ship in *The Orange Box* and that we finished work before *Half-Life 2: Episode Two* was complete. This gave us time to go back and put more work into the game, particularly the end level. If we'd shipped upon completion then there never would have been a physical character model

"One of the most rewarding things as a developer is to watch a playtest and see someone smiling, laughing and having a good time"

THE GAMES OF KIM SWIFT

At the start of our interview we tell Swift that we'd like to discuss as much of her career as we can within thirty minutes. "I haven't had a very long career," she replies – but, as you can see, she's accomplished a lot in that short time.



DESERT DRIVER

2004, DigiPen

● A co-op racing game in which one player takes control of a buggy and the other mans its gun turret. Swift served as producer and contributed the car physics to this early student project.



NARBACULAR DROP

2005, DigiPen

● The game that kickstarted Kim Swift's career. Essentially a primitive version of *Portal*, the biggest difference is the visual style, which Valve's Robin Walker said looked too much like *Quake*.



PORTAL

2007, Valve

● Swift and the rest of the *Narbacular Drop* team later moved to Valve and spent loads of Gabe Newell's pocket money making this: perhaps the greatest four hours in puzzle game history.

for GLaDOS, for example, but that extra time allowed us to put that whole boss battle in."

Having transformed *Narbacular Drop* into one of the single greatest games ever made while at Valve, Kim Swift is obviously a great person to attest to the unique corporate spirit outlined in Valve's recently leaked Handbook For New Employees (see page 47). But unlike *Portal 2* designer David Sawyer, who tells us that the Perpetual Testing Initiative DLC was developed without anyone needing to greenlight it, Swift says that Valve is a much more traditional company than the literature might suggest. "I haven't seen the handbook and there definitely wasn't a handbook when I was an employee," she reveals unsurprisingly as the first edition was published in March 2012. "I'd say that there's a lot more freedom than a lot of companies, but there's a definitely a hierarchy. Gabe Newell is at the top as the CEO, there's a board of directors who make all the big decisions and there's a project lead for every team making sure things stay organised and on track. I think if there's no structure at all a company wouldn't do very well."

Nevertheless, Swift is quick to acknowledge that Valve's is a relatively open environment – so much so that when development of *Portal 2* began, she was allowed to switch to a completely different project just because she wanted to. "Valve had a clear idea of where they wanted to go with *Portal* at the time that I didn't necessarily agree with," she reveals. "I worked on *Portal 2* for about three months and I then left the team to work on *Left 4 Dead*.

"I'd never worked on an FPS before," she adds, but concedes that designing its levels wasn't that different to creating *Portal*. "It was quite similar in that your aim as a designer is to guide a player through a level, and you use a lot of tricks to do that, including lighting, et cetera… It was more of a challenge, though, because you're guiding four players rather than just one. It became an interesting interplay of how you would encourage players to stay together but at the same time put out carrots to tempt them apart for dramatic moments."

Overall, Swift is grateful to have been able to switch projects. "I wanted to work with Randy Lundeen, who is one of the best environment artists at the company, and thought I could learn a lot from him and from working in a different genre," she says. After *Left 4 Dead*, Swift moved straight onto the sequel, but it wasn't long before she left Valve for new pastures.

"I joined Airtight Games in November 2009, so I've been there nearly three years and I've loved it so far," says Swift. "It's a really fun and creative place, and I love coming to work every day and collaborating with the team."

Upon joining Airtight, Swift worked on a game that was never announced and is unlikely to be in the future. "After that my team and I decided to pitch ideas for new games. A few different ideas were put forward and mine was chosen for development because it was the fastest to prototype." Built as a

As an unhyped bonus bundled into *The Orange Box*, *Portal* is probably the best freebie in the history of videogames.


Left 4 Dead

A BRIEF HISTORY OF AIRTIGHT GAMES

IT MAY BE surprising to hear that Kim Swift would leave the developer that made *Half-Life 2* to work for the one that made *Dark Void*, but there's actually much more to Airtight Games than Capcom's disappointing jetpack shooter.

Founded in 2004 by a group of games industry veterans, Airtight features staff formerly of *Shadowrun*-creator FASA studios, was co-founded by ex-Microsoft Game Studios boss and creator of *Halo 2600*, Ed Fries, and includes many of the core team behind the critically acclaimed *Crimson Skies*. As a studio it might not have proved its worth just yet but it has a fine pedigree that shines through in the apparent quality of *Quantum Conundrum*.

Beyond that, little is known of Airtight's plans, but the studio's website claims that an "ambitious triple-A title in a genre that is both unique and refreshingly unexplored" is currently in the works. Interestingly, another DigiPen alumnus, Josh Neff, is currently working at Airtight and claims to be programming "an exciting new multiplayer game". It's unclear if the two unannounced projects are one and the same, but after the ambition of *Dark Void* and the great impression made by *Quantum Conundrum* we're certainly intrigued to find out.



HALF-LIFE 2: Episode Two
2007, Valve

Though Swift is credited on this incredible sequel, she only really served as a QA tester. Valve credits do not list job titles or duties, however, so it must look impressive on her CV.



LEFT 4 DEAD
2008, Valve

Leaving the *Portal 2* team just a few weeks into the game's development, Swift went to work on this innovative co-op shooter, contributing level design among other things.



LEFT 4 DEAD 2
2009, Valve

Valve didn't waste any time making a *Left 4 Dead* sequel – much to the chagrin of some fans – so Swift continued her duties on this project but soon left Valve to pursue other opportunities.



QUANTUM CONUNDRUM
2012, Airtight Games

On the surface *Quantum Conundrum* is a return to the *Portal* style that made Swift famous. In reality it's actually about changing the physics of a room rather than moving through portals.



Quantum Conundrum cleverly reinterprets the same locations in various different dimensions as its puzzle core.

prototype in Unreal Engine, Swift's new game was selected precisely because her team had proved the concept could work by presenting a functional demo, and the game, *Quantum Conundrum*, soon attracted publisher attention. "Square Enix USA picked up the game and they have been amazing. And I mean amazing but underlined several times," she enthuses. "They've been extremely supportive, have provided fantastic feedback, and are fantastic to work with."

It's easy to see what attracted Square Enix to *Quantum Conundrum*. Just like *Portal*, it takes a complex idea and makes it perfectly inviting without watering down the challenge. Most puzzles feel impossible to solve at first but eventually you will, without having to cheat, and you feel like a genius for doing it. "I really loved the experience of making *Portal* and wanted to do something in the same genre," Swift reveals. "I've always loved puzzle games, and making them is actually even more fun. I believe that making a game should be just as much fun as playing one."

Playing *Quantum Conundrum* is a lot of fun, and it's funny too. Like a classic LucasArts adventure, the environment is littered with amusing distractions, such as portraits that change when you switch dimension, giving perplexed players something to amuse themselves with while they're stuck.

No opportunity for comedy is left unexplored, and even death is made funny. Restart a level and the loading screen taunts you with reminders of enjoyable life activities you'd never get to indulge in if you stayed dead. "Humour

> "I've always loved puzzle games and making them is actually even more fun. I believe that making a game should be just as much fun as playing one"

is really important to me", admits Swift. "One of the most rewarding things as a developer is to watch a playtest and see someone smiling, laughing and having a good time."

The humour evident in *Quantum Conundrum*, as well as the rapturous reception to *Portal*'s script, begs the question of why more developers don't follow Swift's example. "Well, I'd say that it's much more difficult to be funny than you'd think," she muses. "That's why there are so many failed stand-up comedians out there."



Not even 30 years old, you can expect Kim Swift's CV to expand into new genres and more diverse challenges in the future.

With *Quantum Conundrum*'s release approaching, we wonder where Kim Swift will turn her attention next. It's clear from our conversation that she'd like to explore other genres, but Swift seems reluctant to make many predictions. "I'm keen to get *Quantum Conundrum* out into the world and see what people think of it, and beyond that I'd just like to keep making games that I enjoy," she says. "I have an idea for a music game I might want to make one day," she teases.

Whatever comes next, you can be sure it will be a left turn. "A lot of publishers are so unwilling to take a risk on new ideas," Swift laments. "There's a lack of risk-taking as an industry. All of the major games you see these days have a number in the title. I like sequels, it's nice to return to those worlds, but we need some fresh ideas too."

Swift, we suggest, has been luckier than most developers. She's created three new IPs in a row, has reinvented the puzzle genre and has been able to pick and choose her own projects, and all before her 30th birthday. "I'm quite lucky and incredibly grateful for all of the opportunities I've had so far," she agrees.

ALSO FROM DIGIPEN

More games from the institute that breeds geniuses



TAG: THE POWER OF PAINT

A NON-VIOLENT FPS in which players can shoot different coloured paint around an environment – each colour granting them a different power of traversal.

TAG WON BEST STUDENT GAME AT IGF2009 AND ITS TEAM WAS HIRED BY VALVE TO BRING ITS PAINT MECHANIC TO *PORTAL 2*.

RIKKO

A MULTIPLAYER action game where you shoot balls around the inside of a cube to break blocks, while avoiding other shots. The more you ricochet a shot the higher your multiplier gets. *Rikko* is a great example of online gaming's potential to break out from the traditional deathmatch template.

ART DIRECTOR JESSICA YEN NOW WORKS AS A TOOLS PROGRAMMER AT MONOLITH PRODUCTIONS.



KISSES

AN *ANIMAL Crossing*-style town sim that makes relationships into a game mechanic, *Kisses* encourages you to show love for as many of your neighbours as possible, but is easier said than done once they all start to become jealous of each other and turn on you. Balancing their affections – essentially cheating and getting away with it – is the name of the game.

KISSES WAS A FINALIST AT IGF 2005, AND CREATOR RYAN JUCKETT WORKS AT BUNGIE. BUT DON'T EXPECT MUCH KISSING IN THE DEVELOPER'S FIRST POST-*HALO* PROJECT.



SCAVENGER HUNT

A COMPETITIVE multiplayer game that doesn't involve killing people, *Scavenger Hunt* is instead a race to locate and retrieve a number of items from a street before anyone else manages it. The catch is that you can only refer to the list of items at a drop-off point, meaning those with the best memory have the advantage.

A FINALIST AT SLAMDANCE 2005 AND THE IGF, *SCAVENGER HUNT* WENT ON TO WIN SLAMDANCE'S AUDIENCE AWARD.





INCANDESCENCE

A RACE against time, or rather music, *Incandescence* asks you to escape a living city before the music stops. Easier said than done it requires speed-run like ability and quick reactions.

INCANDESCENCE'S EVOCATIVE IMAGERY IS THE WORK OF CHIN FONG, WHOSE TALENTS EARNED HIM A PLACE ON THE *HALO 4* ART TEAM AT 343 INDUSTRIES.



CRAZY CROSS

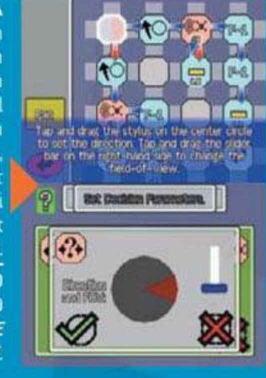
AN UNUSUAL game in that it's a sequel to a previous DigiPen project, *Crazy Cross* is the follow-up to *Crazy Lou 64* (made three years previously) and sees the final boss battle of the first game conclude in such a way that it sends the player right back to the start of the game, re-presenting familiar characters in twisted ways as the player tries to work out exactly how it could have happened.

CRAZY CROSS'S BIZARRE PREMISE AND HAND DRAWN BACKGROUNDS WON IT A FINALIST'S PLACE AT IGF 2003.

PROTISTA

AN UNUSUAL DigiPen project in that it's for a console rather than PC, this DS game is designed to get both creative and analytical sides of the brain going as you design your own creatures, before defining AI routines for them and leaving them in a Petri dish to see how they interact with one another.

DESIGNERS COREY ROSS AND CLARK MORSE BOTH WORKED ON THE DS'S *METROID PRIME HUNTERS* AT NST.



RUMBLEBOX

PROVING THERE'S still plenty of innovation left in the fighting genre, *Rumblebox*'s fighters crumble into their component parts when defeated, gradually filling their box arena with geometric shapes and changing the lay of the land. The winner is the first to escape the box by climbing upon the defeated.

RUMBLEBOX WAS A DESERVED FINALIST AT SEVERAL INDIE AWARDS IN 2006, AND WON THE PHYSICS PRIZE AT SLAMDANCE.



WANT TO PLAY? ALL OF THE ABOVE GAMES CAN BE DOWNLOADED FREE OF CHARGE AT WWW.DIGIPEN.EDU

HOW SCI-FI ARE YOU?

Use the SciFiNow flowchart to find out…

START

HAVE YOU SEEN STAR WARS?
- STUPID QUESTION → DID HAN SHOOT FIRST?
- NO → END

DID HAN SHOOT FIRST?
- YES. YES. YES → DO YOU WANT TO BELIEVE?
- NAH. IT WAS GREEDO → IS MEMORABILIA FOR DESKS OR KIDS?

DO YOU WANT TO BELIEVE?
- YES I DO → WOULD YOU PASS A VOIGHT-KAMPFF TEST?
- BELIEVE IN WHAT? → DO THESE MEAN ANYTHING TO YOU: 4,8,15,16, 23,42

WOULD YOU PASS A VOIGHT-KAMPFF TEST?
- NATURALLY → WHAT DOES OCP STAND FOR?
- A WHAT-KAMPFF? → DO YOU KNOW WHAT EXACTLY THE TROUBLE WITH TRIBBLES IS?

IS MEMORABILIA FOR DESKS OR KIDS?
- KIDS → WOULD YOU PREFER AN IPAD OR ZIGGY?
- DESKS → WHAT MAKES TIME TRAVEL POSSIBLE?

WOULD YOU PREFER AN IPAD OR ZIGGY?
- IPAD → NOWHERE NEAR GEEKY ENOUGH. BUT THERE IS HOPE
- ZIGGY → WHAT MAKES TIME TRAVEL POSSIBLE?

DO THESE MEAN ANYTHING TO YOU: 4,8,15,16, 23,42
- LOTTERY PREDICTION? → WHAT MAKES TIME TRAVEL POSSIBLE?
- OF COURSE → UNOBTAINIUM OR ADAMANTIUM?

DO YOU KNOW WHAT EXACTLY THE TROUBLE WITH TRIBBLES IS?
- THEY SMELL A BIT? → HOW DO YOU MAKE A SOYLENT GREEN?
- SURE → DO YOU PLAY WITH YOUR MASHED POTATO?

WHAT DOES OCP STAND FOR?
- HAVEN'T A CLUE → DO YOU PLAY WITH YOUR MASHED POTATO?
- OMNI CONSUMER PRODUCTS → HOW DO YOU SPELL 'RECALL'?

WHAT MAKES TIME TRAVEL POSSIBLE?
- FLUX CAPACITOR → UNOBTAINIUM OR ADAMANTIUM?
- NOTHING → SOMEWHERE INSIDE YOU IS A NERD TRYING TO GET OUT

UNOBTAINIUM OR ADAMANTIUM?
- ADAMANTIUM → WHO IS HAL JORDAN?
- UNOBTAINIUM → WHAT DOES V STAND FOR?

DO YOU PLAY WITH YOUR MASHED POTATO?
- NEVER → HOW DO YOU MAKE A SOYLENT GREEN?
- YEP → WHERE IS BABYLON 4?

HOW DO YOU SPELL 'RECALL'?
- LIKE THAT → WHERE IS BABYLON 4?
- NOT LIKE THAT → WHAT CLASS OF PLANET IS VULCAN?

WHAT DOES V STAND FOR?
- VIMTO → SOMEWHERE INSIDE YOU IS A NERD TRYING TO GET OUT
- VISITORS. OR VENDETTA. WHICHEVER → THE FORCE IS WITH YOU. BUT YOU MUST TRAIN HARDER

WHO IS HAL JORDAN?
- NO IDEA → WHAT DOES V STAND FOR?
- EVERYBODY KNOWS THAT… → FANCY A TRIP ON THE NOSTROMO?

HOW DO YOU MAKE A SOYLENT GREEN?
- WITH PEOPLE → WHERE IS BABYLON 4?
- PAINT IT? → FANCY A TRIP ON THE NOSTROMO?

WHERE IS BABYLON 4?
- DUNNO → DO YOU KNOW WHAT THE CULTURE IS?
- LOST IN TIME → WHAT CLASS OF PLANET IS VULCAN?

FANCY A TRIP ON THE NOSTROMO?
- ARE YOU MENTAL? → WHAT WAS SUPPOSED TO HAPPEN ON 27 AUGUST 1997?
- ISN'T THAT A VAMPIRE? → SOMEWHERE INSIDE YOU IS A NERD TRYING TO GET OUT

WHAT WAS SUPPOSED TO HAPPEN ON 27 AUGUST 1997?
- A PARTY? → THE FORCE IS WITH YOU. BUT YOU MUST TRAIN HARDER
- JUDGMENT DAY → CAN YOU NAME THE FIVE?

DO YOU KNOW WHAT THE CULTURE IS?
- SUNDAY TIMES SUPPLEMENT? → WHAT WAS SUPPOSED TO HAPPEN ON 27 AUGUST 1997?
- YES → CAN YOU NAME THE FIVE?

WHAT CLASS OF PLANET IS VULCAN?
- UPPER? → DO YOU KNOW WHAT THE CULTURE IS?
- M → CAN YOU NAME THE FIVE?

CAN YOU NAME THE FIVE?
- SURE CAN'T → IMPRESSIVE. YOUR SCI-FI KNOWLEDGE IS PRETTY AMAZING
- SURE CAN → WE BOW DOWN TO YOU, MASTER OF ALL GEEKDOM

NOWHERE NEAR GEEKY ENOUGH. BUT THERE IS HOPE

SOMEWHERE INSIDE YOU IS A NERD TRYING TO GET OUT

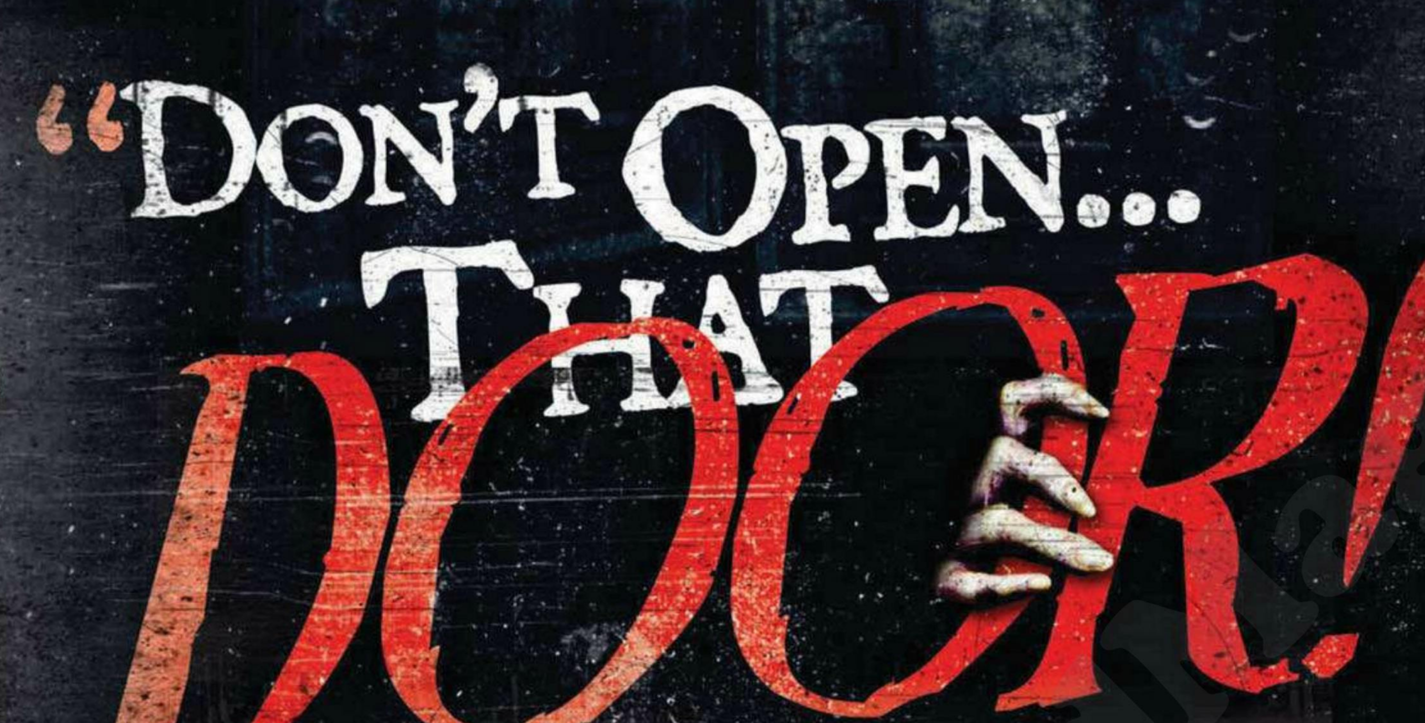
THE FORCE IS WITH YOU. BUT YOU MUST TRAIN HARDER

IMPRESSIVE. YOUR SCI-FI KNOWLEDGE IS PRETTY AMAZING

WE BOW DOWN TO YOU, MASTER OF ALL GEEKDOM

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THE AMAZING SPIDER-MAN

MORE SCI-FI THAN YOU THOUGHT?
JOIN OTHER LIKE-MINDED INDIVIDUALS EVERY MONTH AND READ SCIFINOW. BECAUSE SCI-FI'S FOR EVERYONE



"Don't Open... That Door!"

One man's quest to return to Resident Evil's roots

While Resident Evil 6 continues the series' action-centric evolution, another department at Capcom, responsible for Resident Evil: Revelations on 3DS, is looking to restore the ideas that defined the franchise during its earlier instalments. Producer Masachika Kawata tells us how he can save survival-horror...



Revelations is an uneasy mix of old and new directions for the franchise. Iterating on it, however, could produce satisfying results for long-time fans.

A couple of months ago, Dan Pinchbeck of *Dear Esther* and *Amnesia: A Machine For Pigs* developer thechineseroom made the bold claim that survival-horror is dead, and that we still label *Resident Evil* as such out of "habit". It's a harsh yet accurate assessment of a series than has undoubtedly been on an action-oriented trajectory since the revolutionary *Resident Evil 4*. Expanding on that reworking of the series' DNA, *RE5* bombarded the player with so many firearms and autosaves that the 'survival' part of the genre was systematically removed; it was primarily a third-person shooter, with the remnants of *Resident Evil 1-3* present in the control scheme, story and universe, but little else. This October's *Resident Evil 6*, which sees the world reeling from a global outbreak, again strays further away from the survival-horror struggle that we associate with earlier games. It is arguably a necessary commercial transition, and one that yields its own creatively healthy results – but it certainly might not be the only way that Capcom envisions *Resident Evil*'s future.

"The goal of the game is not to simply take your enemies down, but to survive. To figure out on your own how to survive, and what you need to do"

PRODUCER MASACHIKA KAWATA

There is one team within Capcom that wants to preserve the former paradigm of *Resident Evil* design. Led by producer Masachika Kawata, the first by-product of his attempt to revive traditional survival-horror while making concessions to modern gaming was this year's *Resident Evil: Revelations* on the 3DS, an only half-successful attempt to hybridise these design philosophies. Despite *Revelations*' ill-conceived episodic structure, Kawata and company did successfully update the core mechanics of earlier instalments, a pleasing result for anyone alienated by Capcom's recent action-savvy *Resi* games. They now have the groundwork to expand on that approach.

"Our thought, from a marketing perspective, was that we could establish a different way to go about things," Kawata tells us. "For instance, you've probably seen the trailer for *Resident Evil 6*, and that's the way that it'll be. You have the numbered games playing one way, *Revelations* having adventure elements, and *Operation Raccoon City* serving another market with third-person shooter elements."

Think of it as almost two concurrently-running *Resident Evil* strands, then: the mainline *Resi* series adapting to what Capcom considers to be changing times, and a sequence of alternative titles overseen by Kawata and his team that have a more retro fit. It's a way to satisfy two increasingly different markets. There are gamers who miss being challenged on a number of levels by *Resi* – and Kawata appears to be conscious of this. "I think survival-horror is this thing where you have very limited ammo, so the goal of the game is not to simply take your enemies down, but to survive. To figure out on your own how to survive, and what you need to do."

The producer feels that *Revelations* reflected a number of innovative attempts at implementing this. "A couple of new approaches that I thought worked really well for *Revelations* was that fact that you could evade enemies, and that you didn't necessarily have to kill them," Kawata says. "Also that you could use the bio-scanner, the Genesis, to scan enemies and get health items that you normally wouldn't be able to get. I think what's really the most important thing for survival-horror is that you create this kind of gameplay where you keep the player's motivation for playing the game. In order to progress, they have to clear this really tough hurdle, and they want to do that and see what happens next. I personally think we succeeded with that in *Revelations* because we implemented this surreal drama type of format. Right at the end of the mission, something happens, and you think, 'Okay, what's going to happen in the next mission?' It works very well, I think."

In some ways, *Revelations* worked in bringing classic *Resident Evil* mechanics up to date. Prior to *RE4*'s release, there was a growing sense among critics and

The amazing reception of the GameCube's *Resident Evil* remake suggested that fans weren't tired of the formula – just that the formula needed to be re-evaluated.

"One of the most fun things about this genre is fighting against things you can't really see or understand"

BEYOND RE6

Kawata and Mikami prepare their return to survival-horror

Just as **games™** went to print, rumours began to surface about Masachika Kawata's next attempt to revive the classic survival-horror tropes of *Resident Evil* within a new title. Dubbed *Resident Evil Degeneration-Damnation-Downfall* on a since-removed online news story, the 3DS cartridge is believed to house the two CG movies – *Degeneration* and *Damnation* – with the third component, *Downfall*, being the game itself. Allegedly set between *Resident Evils 5* and *6*, and starring Chris Redfield, the game will almost certainly depict the traumatic life-changing events that the plot of *RE6* refers back to. Expect the handheld title to further merge action and survival-horror elements, and hopefully improve on some of the quality issues in *Revelations*. Meanwhile, the godfather of *Resident Evil*, Shinji Mikami, is busy prepping his own survival-horror game. Codenamed *Project Zwei* (pictured) it's the first game from Mikami's new studio, Tango Gameworks, and will be a "true survival-horror game" according to Mikami. "I've found my focus and once again I'm striving for pure survival-horror," he said during the announcement. Could the codename – Zwei being the German word for two – suggest that Mikami sees his game as some sort of spiritual sequel to *Resident Evil*? Mikami suggests we shouldn't read too much into it. But we just can't help ourselves.



A HISTORY IN GENRE

How the Resi series spread its wings from survival-horror



SURVIVAL



1996 Resident Evil

Survival-horror took shape with this compelling mix of adventuring, resource management and shocks.



1999 Resident Evil 2

It had bigger set-pieces and a Hollywood pace, but *Resident Evil 2* was still a survival-horror game at its heart.



1999 Resident Evil 3

Resident Evil 3's addition of action moves and more weaponry de-emphasised the survival aspect of play.



2000 Resident Evil: Code Veronica

Developed at the same time as *Resi 3*, and by a different team, *Code Veronica* felt much more like a sequel to *Resident Evil 2*.



2001 Resident Evil Gaiden

Not a great game by any means, but *Gaiden* did at least throttle resources to maintain that against-the-odds feeling.



2002 Resident Evil (Remake)/Resident Evil 0

Juggling two characters at once was a nice twist on *Resident Evil*'s formula, but the classic structure was beginning to creak by now.



2010 Resident Evil 5: Lost In Nightmares

This post-launch DLC adopted a familiar setting and pace to create survival-horror tension within *RE5*'s action template.



2012 Resident Evil: Revelations

Kawata's mix of action and survival-horror tropes was a bold idea, but the execution failed to excite.

LIGHT GUN



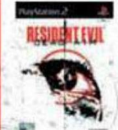
2000 Resident Evil: Survivor

This early spin-off proved unpopular, despite the concessions of direct control and multiple routes.



2002 Resident Evil Code: Veronica Survivor 2

Sloppy controls ruined any attempt to make this feel like classic *Resi*, as did relegating the plot to a dream sequence.



2003 Resident Evil: Dead Aim

Improved aiming made this better than the previous games, but it was still both a poor *Resident Evil* and a poor light gun game.



2007 ResidentEvil: Umbrella Chronicles

The survival-horror pace, canonical story and decent mechanics made this the best light gun game in the series.



2009 Resident Evil: Darkside Chronicles

The sequel to *Umbrella Chronicles* balanced out its difficulty and won over the hardcore with lots of fan service.





MULTIPLAYER



2003 Resident Evil Outbreak

This early attempt to take *Resident Evil* online was ruined when the online component was removed from the PAL version.



2004 Resident Evil: Outbreak – File #2

With proper online play, this sequel showed that survival-horror could be given a twist. But the lack of good characters let it down.



2009 Resident Evil 5

Online co-op made this action sequel shine, while multiplayer Mercenaries mode gave it incredible longevity.



2011 Resident Evil: The Mercenaries 3D

RE's score attack mode lost much of its appeal when this full game expanded the structure unneccesarily.



2012 Operation Raccoon City

This *SOCOM*-alike felt nothing like a real *Resident Evil* game, and was a boring squad shooter too. A low point for the series.



ACTION



2004 ResidentEvil 4

Moving away from the classic formula was a big risk but it totally paid off with one of the greatest action games ever made.



2009 Resident Evil 5

More of the same kept the action exciting, but *RE5* lacked the originality that made *Resident Evil 4* such a revelation.



2010 Resident Evil 5: Desperate Escape

RE5's other DLC went for action instead of survival-horror, pleasing both audiences without compromising either content.



2012 Resident Evil 6

Undoubtedly more of an action game than ever, *RE6* looks to please fans by reviving zombies and a classic atmosphere and pace.

Resident Evil 3 was noted for being formulaic upon release, yet it still contains some of the series' strongest individual moments

fans that the games had hit the ceiling in terms of what traditional survival-horror could do, running aground with *Zero* in particular – but some of those ideas that made the games scary are certainly due a rethink. For Kawata with *Revelations*, part of that came in the form of utilising adventure elements effectively. "I kind of consider adventure to be this thing where the player is finding out who they are, what they are, and where they are, on their own," he explains. "So I think those elements work really well with survival-horror gameplay. In *Revelations*, for example, there's an instance where Jill [Valentine] gets on the boat and ends up passing out. When she wakes up, she has no weapons at all, just a knife or something. I personally think it's this kind of gameplay – where you start from nothing and you have to explore, find more weapons, find out what's going on… I think this kind of adventure gameplay is what survival-horror is."

That's perhaps the primary casualty within the series' recent evolution – that sense of environment, which was always elevated by the complex nature of exploration in earlier titles, has been replaced by set piece-driven spectacle. That functions marvellously well in the fourth and fifth games, but on some level *Resi* now lacks that sense of the setting being a labyrinthine puzzle in itself, like the Spencer Mansion or the Raccoon City Police Station, which were crafted deliberately so to provoke tension in the player. That kind of atmosphere is lost when you're always shuttling forward through different backdrops at a rapid pace, a la *Resident Evil 5*.

The struggle for Kawata and his team, then, will be in finding ways to reinvent *Resident Evil* in this classic image while finding new ways to keep it relevant.

Presentation will have a lot to do with it. If we consider the visual direction of the GameCube's *Resident Evil* remake, presenting what had become the series' trademarks through an updated lens was essential to making it feel surprising to the player once again – Kawata's team is presented with the opportunity to try something totally different to put the fear in players, and visuals will similarly be a key part of that. "As for why graphics are so important in survival-horror games, I think one of the most fun things about this genre is fighting against things you can't really see or understand at first," Kawata tells us. "So I think it's really important that you're able to realistically depict these situations where you can't see around the corner, and that it looks believable."

It's a strange phenomenon that true survival-horror has stagnated over the past decade, when the improved audiovisual capabilities of current hardware enables so many more possibilities to scare players compared to the genre's PSone heyday.

Kawata sees the creative potential of current technology, but working within time constraints on *Revelations* seemed to be holding back some of his more nuanced ideas. "What I'm personally really interested in is sound mixing," he says. "The sound staff are always working their butts off to deliver the best they possibly can, but I think we can still make it more realistic. With *Revelation*'s goo creatures, for instance, wouldn't it be cool if you could hear the water dripping off them as they walked, or whatever kind of substance that is? Part of that is time limitations, and we only have so much time we can work on this game before we have to get it out of the door. But that kind of realistic sound is what I would like to go for."

He cites the chainsaw in *Resident Evil 4* as one example where that sort of touch was particularly unsettling. "That was always really scary. I think it would be great if we could add more of these individual aspects and small details that would really bring out the atmosphere."

> "The sound staff are always working their butts off to deliver the best they possibly can, but I think we can still make it more realistic"

Reconciling some of the more outdated gameplay mechanics is an obstacle that Capcom also has to deal with, however. While the controls felt contemporised for *Revelations*, other aspects of the interface felt archaic, especially the inventory system. "I think there's a lot we still need to improve in survival-horror, but just to give you an example, let's say weapon management," Kawata says. "I think part of it is hardware specs and memory limitations, but I think there's a better way to manage your weapon inventory, customisation, and so forth. In *Revelations*, for instance, you had to run to the crate every time you wanted to switch or upgrade your weapons. I don't think we should make it possible to let players do that any place, or any time, but I think there's a better way than making them run back to that crate every time. From a memory perspective and a gameplay perspective, I think the way inventory management worked in *Resident Evil 4* was really cool."

Whether it's inventory or puzzle design, Capcom essentially has to rewrite its own traditions to progress in this fashion – this sub-series needs an even balance of the old concepts that still work and progressive ideas that provide



Remaking another older *Resi* game would illustrate how timeless some of those ideas are – *Resident Evil 2* would surely be a prime candidate for this

RESIDENT EVIL'S RETRO FUTURE

SOME OF THE OLDER TRADEMARKS WE'D LIKE TO SEE RETURN TO THE SERIES



The Zapping System

■ EVERYONe loved *Resident Evil 2*'s slight adjustments to the structure of the arc, depending on the order that you tackled Leon or Claire's respective treks through Raccoon City. This could be explored in altogether more advanced fashion today; it's possible that this type of feature could unite the three storylines of Leon, Chris and Jake in *RE6*.

Backtracking

■ RE-EXAMINING your surroundings was always inherent to the experience of a *Resident Evil* game, and transforming the player's perception of these environments as the story went along was a unique achievement of the series, peppering in new enemies to make you wary of backtracking.

Puzzle Design

■ *RESIDENT Evil 6*'s puzzles are in the simplistic realm of *Resident Evil 4* and *5* – but there's still room for genuinely smart brainteasers that demand a touch of lateral thinking elsewhere in the franchise. *Revelations* showed promise in this regard, and we hope Kawata's team builds on it with whatever comes next.

Genuine Scares

■ WHEN was the last time *Resident Evil* actually scared the crap out of you? The regenerators in *Resident Evil 4*? Yes, it's been a while since the series actually had the capacity to freak us out on a purely psychological level – and jumpy moments don't count. *Revelations* seriously lacked that kind of terror.



Claustrophobic locales

■ *RESIDENT EVIL: Revelations* had a smart, series-aware setting choice by essentially embedding a traditional *Resi* mansion within the S.S. Queen Zenobia cruise liner. Main instalments seem to have erred towards larger, open locations; we'd argue that there's also potential in revisiting the idea of tighter, corridor-based indoor spaces.

"The more the player has the ability to freely control their character, you find that these slow, lumbering zombies stop working because you can run circles around them"

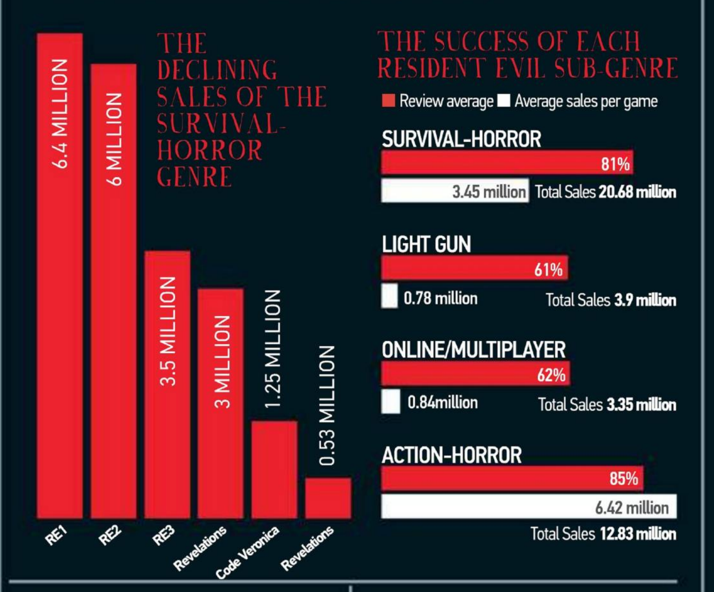
a modern framework for the games. *Revelations* acknowledges that factor on some level, but it's muddled, almost too conscious of being a handheld game to be an enduring *Resident Evil* title. That especially shows in the bite-sized chapter length. It's counter-intuitive for a series that traditionally engages players for hours at a time.

It still wasn't scary enough, either. Going back to what Dan Pinchbeck says about the series, it's indicative of the consensus on what *Resi* represents today – the big-budget B-movie direction Capcom is taking with *Resident Evil 6* is wholly credible, yet it's been a long time since anyone really considered them to be pioneers in creating scary experiences; jumpy, maybe, and occasionally grotesque, but not the kind of games where the player feels anxious to open a door or pass a window for fear of an imminent death. In truth, survival-horror is a genre that has to find new ways to scare people, and that's why the original *Amnesia* was able to capture a willing audience – it was the first horror game since *Eternal Darkness* that really dared to mess with the minds of its audience. And, although *Dead Space* didn't reinvent the wheel as far as its mechanics were concerned, the game found a new way to present horror to the player by exploring the human potential of sound design, using Isaac Clarke's panicked breathing and racing heartbeat to replicate the same reaction in your living room.

There is, of course, the possibility that the genre of survival-horror, or at least the perception of it, has changed. In the games industry, genre classification has become even less relevant in the past five years, evident in discussions about which category *Mass Effect 3* falls into when, as an RPG, it is mostly composed of cover-based shooting and devoid of dice roll-based combat. *Resident Evil 5* could still be called survival-horror if we accept that the DNA of the genre has been revised; it's ironic that *Resident Evil 4* ended up being among the most influential

RESIDENT EVIL BY THE NUMBERS

SO WHY has Capcom skewed its *Resident Evil* games more towards action than traditional survival-horror in recent years? When you look at the raw data, it's easy to see why. Though we may all look back nostalgically at the old style *Resi* design, it's clear that the new action style, as popularised by *Resident Evil 4*, attracts more positive reviews and a greater number of sales. Yes, the first two *Resident Evil* games have accumulated huge sales over multiple re-releases but there's a definite diminishing return for the genre over time as the second graph shows. Action-horror – with only minor concessions to traditional fans – is probably here to stay.



third-person shooters of all time, which in turn accelerated the main instalments to the point they're at now, attempting to draw in multiplayer-cultured action gamers in any way they can.

For Kawata, handheld consoles make for an intimate horror experience – and cracking the multiplayer side of that is something he also hopes to achieve with future *Resident Evil* projects. "One of the reasons I think survival-horror works really well on portables is that I think it is perfect when it is single-player. But I think that if we can crack the nut of scary co-op play, we'd really be able to clear a big hurdle." Kawata notes that the transition to full third-person has forever changed the way we experience *Resident Evil*. "I think one of the big differences is that, way back when, there was a much larger spiritual element to these games. You know... ghosts and spirits and so forth coming at you.

Whereas, the way it's progressed now, you're trying to evade physical harm, like a zombie biting you. I think one of the biggest changes to come over the past 15 years is the control scheme."

Another point of development could be altering the threat level facing Chris, Jill and company, to reflect the increasing level of movement options that players are given in *Revelations*, like strafing and first-person aiming. "The more the player has the ability to freely control their character, you find that these slow, lumbering zombies stop working because you can run circles around them," Kawata says. "So we have *Operation Raccoon City*, right, where you have zombies.

However, they're not the only enemies. You also have these hardcore spec ops soldiers you have to fight while the zombies are coming at you. The other thing is that zombies aren't everything these days. The main theme behind *Resident Evil* has always been 'biohazard.' So from that perspective, I think it's perfectly fine to try out other enemies and monsters. It doesn't always have to be zombies. But while I say that, the first time I saw the *Resident Evil 6* trailer, I thought, 'Oh man, zombies are what this series is all about.'"

Franchise missteps like *Operation Raccoon City* show that Capcom has to take a degree of care with how the company expands on its intellectual property: a non-canon, Western-developed online team shooter with stock main characters smacks of complacency, and, in the grand scheme of the series, it's fortunate that *ORC*'s release was comfortably wedged between *Revelations* and *RE6*. As a brand that has such a consistent, passionate fanbase who will follow the series across genres, on some level we expect Capcom to be mindful of the principles that made the 1996 original the standard bearer of survival-horror.

Kawata and Capcom have the ability to recapture that in a way that longtime fans will recognise, though. The publisher is no doubt gunning for *Call Of Duty*-type numbers with *Resident Evil 6*, and the market tells them that action-oriented titles have a better chance of selling, rather than deferring back to haunted house-type scares. *Resident Evil*, however, has proven that it's a big enough platform to support multiple types of experience and, in the best cases, craft credible products out of new genres. For Kawata and company, returning to the hallmarks of Nineties survival-horror may prove itself to be a fruitful venture – the challenge now is to find a new way to express that today.



Revelations' Raid Mode was a successful attempt to generate replay value.



Meet the unsung heroes of a generation – a catalogue of wonderful and original titles that, despite their quality, failed to deliver on a commercial level and sank without a trace. You've probably seen some of them languishing in bargain bins but have been put off by their age or distressingly low price. But while most gamers can survive on a core diet of the same three or four games every couple of years, variety is famously the spice of life. With that in mind, and as the current crop of consoles enter their final months, allow **games™** to present…

THE BEST 25 OVERLOOKED GAMES OF THE GENERATION

CONAN

FORMAT: **PS3, 360**
RELEASE: **28 September 2007**
CHARTED AT: **It didn't**
EXPECT TO PAY: **£3-5**

WHY YOU DIDN'T PLAY IT: It's hardly the high-profile licence it once may have been, plus launching on the same day as *Halo 3* and *FIFA 08* was commercial suicide.

WHY YOU SHOULD PLAY IT: While hardly a contender for the hack-and-slash crown, Nihilistic's take on Robert E. Howard's famed and filmically misinterpreted barbarian proved a robust and faithful recital of the source material. With more blood, body parts, buffness and bare breasts than any other game in its field, it's an enjoyably base experience – albeit one that clearly worships at the altar of the *God Of War* – and a game well worth the couple of coins it can be found for today.

THE CLUB

FORMAT: **PC, PS3, 360** RELEASE: **8 February 2008**
CHARTED AT: **7** EXPECT TO PAY: **£3-5**

WHY YOU DIDN'T PLAY IT: Bizarre's logo might have had significance on the box of a racing game but it proved meaningless on that of a shooter. The box also did a terrible job of explaining what the game was, hardly what you want for a new IP launching alongside the likes of *DMC4* and *Turok*.

WHY YOU SHOULD PLAY IT: Though it has arguably since been usurped by, of all things, a 50 Cent game, Bizarre Creations' rare divergence from the driving genre still managed to boldly combine tight shooter mechanics, an old-school score attack vibe and even racing sensibilities to create something truly original. Compelling in the same way that *Bulletstorm*'s Echoes and the iOS version of *Rage* are, there's a degree of joy in pipping a friend's high score that echoes that of shaving a couple of splits from the best time on a leaderboard. Which, of course, was one of the things Bizarre did best.



DARK SECTOR

FORMAT: **PC, PS3, 360** RELEASE: **4 April 2008**
CHARTED AT: **7** EXPECT TO PAY: **£3-5**

WHY YOU DIDN'T PLAY IT: Okay, so it launched on the same day as the anticipated *Condemned 2*. But even if it hadn't, D3 Publisher had done little to promote the game, which garnered middling reviews from many outlets.

WHY YOU SHOULD PLAY IT: On the surface a shonky, *Gears*-inspired cover shooter, *Dark Sector* didn't wait long to reveal the ace up – or rather *on* – its sleeve. In the glaive, Digital Extremes had a catch-all instrument of awesomeness, a toy that could be used for complex puzzle-solving one minute then guided through the air to lop off several heads in quick succession the next. This satisfying element is worth the wildly reduced price of admission alone, though many reviewers seemed to take the whole thing too seriously to give it a fair crack.

"WE DIDN'T TELL OUR STORY AS WELL AS WE COULD HAVE. DEFINITELY TOOK IT IN THE CROTCH ON THAT ONE..."

Steve Sinclair, director of Dark Sector, pinpoints one of the problem areas of his game for GameSpot.

ZACK & WIKI: THE QUEST FOR BARBAROS' TREASURE

FORMAT: **Wii** RELEASE: **18 January 2008** CHARTED AT: **17** EXPECT TO PAY: **£3-5**

WHY YOU DIDN'T PLAY IT: Aside from nonexistent marketing for the game, the cutesy cover made it look like a licensed kids' game rather than the hardcore puzzler it actually was.

WHY YOU SHOULD PLAY IT: The game itself is an incredibly devious point-and-click-style puzzle adventure that only the patient will ever see through to the end. It's actually one of the better and more inventive Wii games available despite this dichotomy, even if the trial-and-error nature of the latter challenges does get insanely frustrating. It's also one of the few Wii games to really make good on the promise of the Wii Remote, translating real movements directly into contextual in-game actions.



"IT WAS ONE OF THE HIGHEST-RATED Wii GAMES AND WAS BELOVED BY THE MEDIA [BUT] IT SOLD ABYSMALLY – ABOUT 120,000 UNITS IN 26 MONTHS – FOR NO APPARENT REASON"

Capcom's Chris Kramer explains to Gamasutra how he wasn't best pleased with Zack & Wiki's performance at retail.

THE WORLD ENDS WITH YOU

FORMAT: **DS**
RELEASE: **18 April 2008**
CHARTED AT: **It didn't**
EXPECT TO PAY: **£15-20**



WHY YOU DIDN'T PLAY IT: A confusing title and confusing cover art accurately reflect what is a pretty confusing and Japan-centric game, plus launching the week after *Mario Kart Wii* won't have helped its cause.

WHY YOU SHOULD PLAY IT: While releasing a game on the most popular platform is a great way to sell to the biggest audience possible, it's also going to be the market with the most competition. *The World Ends With You* fell into just that trap, lost among thousands of DS games despite being one of the most creative RPGs in years. Over time, however, its reputation has seen *TWEWY*'s fanbase grow to the point where its protagonists will cameo in *Kingdom Hearts 3D*, teasing a well-deserved sequel to come.



VALKYRIA CHRONICLES

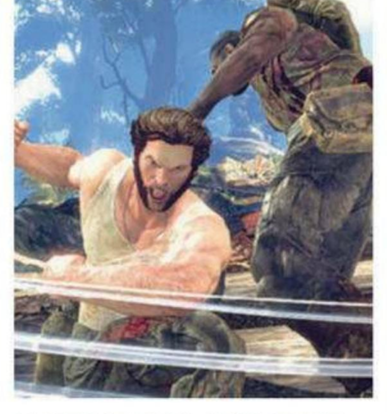
FORMAT: **PS3**
RELEASE: **31 October 2008**
CHARTED AT: **It didn't**
EXPECT TO PAY: **£15-20**

WHY YOU DIDN'T PLAY IT: If you're releasing a niche game, there are definitely better times to do it than during the pre-Christmas rush. Arriving a week after *Fable II*, *Far Cry 2* and *Dead Space* – and on the same day as *Fallout 3* – *Valkyria* was dead in the water.

WHY YOU SHOULD PLAY IT: Hardcore strategy games are never going to do *COD* numbers, but with a demo on PSN and a reasonable word-of-mouth buzz surrounding it, *Valkyria*'s rise was a slow and steady one. It actually did pretty well in Japan, presumably explaining why the two sequels only appeared on PSP, though the low uptake over here means it was always destined to be a cult classic.

"THERE'S ALWAYS SOMETHING NEW TO EXPERIENCE JUST AROUND THE CORNER. AND SAYING THAT ABOUT A MOVIE TIE-IN IS PROBABLY ONE OF THE MOST UNEXPECTED SENTIMENTS WE'VE HAD THIS YEAR"

X-Men Origins: Wolverine surprises us with its quality back in issue 83.



X-MEN ORIGINS: WOLVERINE

FORMAT: **DS, PC, PS2, PS3, PSP, Wii, 360**
RELEASE: **1 May 2009**
CHARTED AT: **2** EXPECT TO PAY: **£5-10**

WHY YOU DIDN'T PLAY IT: Though it entered the charts well on release, *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* bombed in subsequent weeks as the film proved to be awful and surely killed all enthusiasm for any related products, including the game.

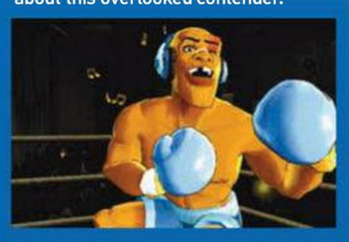
WHY YOU SHOULD PLAY IT: *Wolverine* had no right to be a good game. It just didn't, and that's why so many gamers will have ignored it along with all the other cash-in tat on the market. The film might have been utter dross but the playable version fared far better, an immensely playable take on the character that avoided many of the pitfalls of its big-screen brother and had some great set-pieces. The exception that proves the 'licensed games are all awful' rule, and one to check out if you just want to switch your brain off and hurt people.

PUNCH-OUT!!

FORMAT: **Wii**
RELEASE: **22 May 2009**
CHARTED AT: **It didn't**
EXPECT TO PAY: **£5-10**

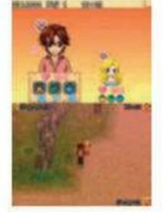
WHY YOU DIDN'T PLAY IT: The simple truth is that *Punch-Out!!* is a dead brand in the 21st Century – most Wii players probably weren't even born when the last game came out in 1995.

WHY YOU SHOULD PLAY IT: To call this Nintendo's most underperforming title in years certainly wouldn't be unfair, though the situation itself certainly is – Next Level Games did a fine job of following up *Super Punch-Out!!*, and while the template hadn't changed in almost 20 years, it also proved that it didn't need to. The punishing difficulty curve and reliance on old-school pattern learning may not have sat well with the majority of the Wii install base but older players will love everything about this overlooked contender.



LOST IN BLUE 3

FORMAT: **DS**
RELEASE: **6 February 2009**
CHARTED AT: **It didn't**
EXPECT TO PAY: **£10-15**



WHY YOU DIDN'T PLAY IT: Released amid the DS puzzle craze when the handheld market was going nuts for *Layton* and *Brain Training*, this inventive sequel found itself lost at sea. It probably didn't help that it was the third near-identical game in two years, mind…

WHY YOU SHOULD PLAY IT: The *Survival Kids* formula has changed little since the 1999 Game Boy Color title, though Konami would do well to listen to player feedback – since the original DS title, *Lost In Blue* has come under fire for being far too difficult for many of the players that enjoy the unique premise, though the games only ever seem to get trickier with each iteration. It's engrossing once you get over that initial hump, mind, and this probably represents the series' pinnacle so far.

NINJA BLADE

FORMAT: **PC, 360** RELEASE: **3 April 2009**
CHARTED AT: **It didn't** EXPECT TO PAY: **£3-5**

WHY YOU DIDN'T PLAY IT: With *Resident Evil 5* riding high in the charts and From Software's game coming across as a cheap knock-off of *Ninja Gaiden*, *Ninja Blade* was doomed from day one.

WHY YOU SHOULD PLAY IT: *Ninja Gaiden*'s 'special' second cousin apparently once had a temp job as a cleaner at Team Ninja, pocketing the scraps from the cutting room floor and binding them together with impossibly stupid cut-scenes masquerading as interactive elements to create one of the dumbest games in recent memory. It's not often you get to play an all-in-pink ninja that throws wrecking balls at giant spiders though, so it's certainly not all bad… especially when the rare privilege to do so will set you back less than a pint.



THE BIGS 2 BASEBALL

FORMAT: **DS, PS2, PS3, PSP, Wii, 360**
RELEASE: **6 February 2009**
CHARTED AT: **It didn't**
EXPECT TO PAY: **£10-15**

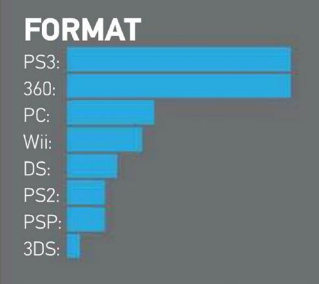
WHY YOU DIDN'T PLAY IT: Baseball fans are few and far between in the UK, leading us to wonder why 2K even saw fit to release the game at all. We're glad it did, though – it's as good an OTT sports game as you'll ever play.

WHY YOU SHOULD PLAY IT: 'But I don't like baseball!' we hear you cry. That's okay – you probably aren't that big on go-karting either, but that won't have stopped you enjoying a few games of *Mario Kart*. 2K's explosive take on the sport isn't all that dissimilar in approach to Nintendo's racer, either – an accessible, OTT game that emphasises fun over all else and barely even requires knowledge of the sport. Good, mindless sporting fun.

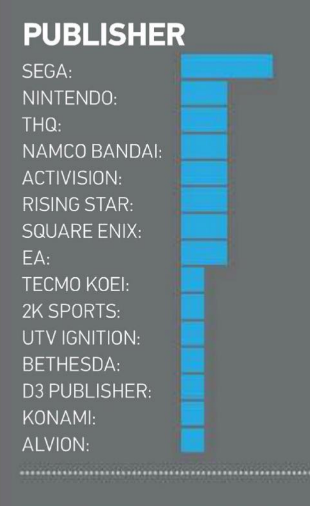


THE MOST OVERLOOKED GAMES IN STATISTICS

FORMAT



PUBLISHER



COUNTRY OF ORIGIN



GENRE

ACTION ADVENTURE:
THIRD-PERSON SHOOTER:
RPG:
SPORT:
PUZZLE:
FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER:
STRATEGY:

YEAR OF RELEASE

2007:
2008:
2009:
2010:
2011:
2012:

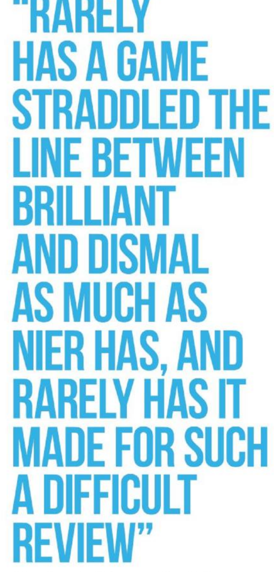


NIER

FORMAT: **PS3, 360** RELEASE: **23 April 2010**
CHARTED AT: **It didn't** EXPECT TO PAY: **£5-10**

WHY YOU DIDN'T PLAY IT: One-word titles like *Gun* and *Bulletstorm* tell you what you're getting. Nonsensical one-word titles like *Nier* do not. Hell, most people didn't even know it existed, let alone what it was. We finished it several times over and we're still not sure…

WHY YOU SHOULD PLAY IT: It's almost impossible to explain *Nier*, such is the bizarre game's skill in leaping between genres and gameplay styles with gay abandon. But for that very reason – the same reason for which it sold about 16 copies – it's also emphatically recommendable. You'll never play another game like it because there won't ever *be* another game like it. Few developers have the balls to leap from action-RPG elements into a text adventure, so such tomfoolery deserves to be celebrated.



"RARELY HAS A GAME STRADDLED THE LINE BETWEEN BRILLIANT AND DISMAL AS MUCH AS NIER HAS, AND RARELY HAS IT MADE FOR SUCH A DIFFICULT REVIEW"

Destructoid word butcher and controversy magnet Jim Sterling highlights the main reason for Nier's mixed critical reception.

WET

FORMAT: **PS3, 360**
RELEASE: **18 September 2009**
CHARTED AT: **6** EXPECT TO PAY: **£3-5**

WHY YOU DIDN'T PLAY IT: Launching at the start of 2009's silly season was a clear error – released just a month or so earlier (and perhaps with a bit more of a push), Rubi's daft grindhouse adventure might have done alright.

WHY YOU SHOULD PLAY IT: Bethesda picking up this oddity came as something of a surprise, as too did the revelation that it wasn't nearly as terrible as it looked like it might be. Technically just shy of solid but immensely playable, the action-packed shooter was a playful and stylish adventure in the Tarantino mould, and is more than deserving of your time and loose change.

"RETAIL IS BECOMING INCREASINGLY CHOOSY AND ACTIVELY REDUCING THE VARIETY THAT IS OFFERED TO CONSUMERS – IF IT IS NOT FIRST-PARTY, A SEQUEL OR SUPPORTED BY A MULTI-MILLION POUND ADVERTISING SPEND, THEY ARE JUST NOT INTERESTED"

Speaking to MCV, Rising Star Games' Martin Defries laments the lack of retail support for Muramasa.



MURAMASA: THE DEMON BLADE

FORMAT: **Wii**
RELEASE: **27 November 2009**
CHARTED AT: **It didn't**
EXPECT TO PAY: **£5-10**

WHY YOU DIDN'T PLAY IT: A combination of factors, really – do you blame the launch window within weeks of the year's biggest games or the fact that many retailers simply refused to stock the game at all? Many stores reallocated their shelf space to concentrate on the real money-spinners – pre-owned titles and triple-A piggy banks.

WHY YOU SHOULD PLAY IT: *Muramasa* was an absolutely beautiful 2D adventure that remains one of the Wii's most intense graphical workouts, though it's just another disaster story for mature games on Wii. Vanillaware's penchant for beautiful 2D visuals proved that you don't necessarily need HD output to add wow factor to your TV screen.



RESONANCE OF FATE

FORMAT: **PS3, 360**
RELEASE: **26 March 2010**
CHARTED AT: **It didn't**
EXPECT TO PAY: **£10-15**

WHY YOU DIDN'T PLAY IT: Sega didn't really do a great job of pinning down the target audience for the game – it looked too flowery for action fans but its hair wasn't spiky enough to get the JRPG crew on board, either.

WHY YOU SHOULD PLAY IT: It's the game that inspired this feature – we'd completely forgotten it even existed until it came up in conversation and we were inspired to return to it, only to find it slowly develops into one of the most interesting JRPGs ever made. With the genre in turmoil, tri-Ace's dedication to twisting and subverting genre conventions should be commended, and anyone that still claims that the genre is dying or dead would do well to investigate this unique example. Preferably while chowing down on a plate of their own words.

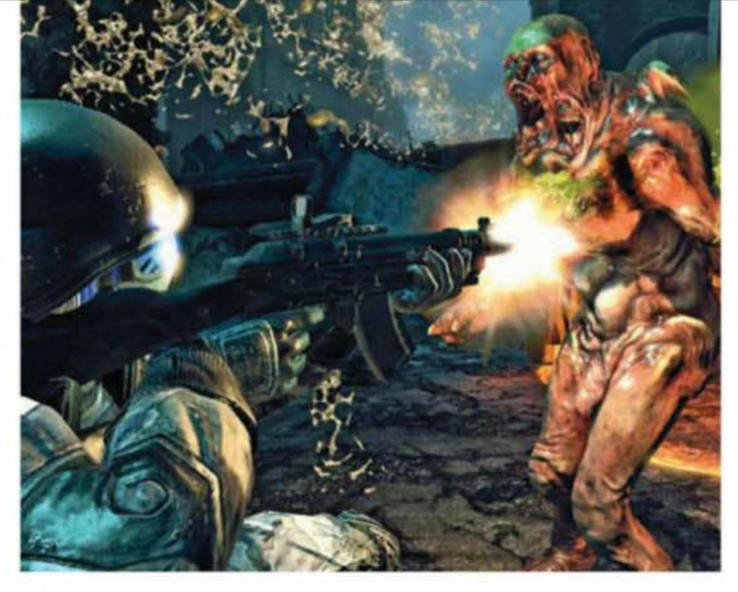


ALPHA PROTOCOL

FORMAT: **PC, PS3, 360**
RELEASE: **28 May 2010**
CHARTED AT: **13** EXPECT TO PAY: **£5-10**

WHY YOU DIDN'T PLAY IT:
The usually quiet period was dominated by *Red Dead Redemption* which clung to the top spot for an impressive five weeks. Mixed reviews of the unpolished RPG can't have helped, either.

WHY YOU SHOULD PLAY IT:
Despite the game's flaws, Obsidian's vision and commitment were enough to spin what could have been a disaster into a game that begs to be played. With real consequences where most games offer binary choices, *Alpha Protocol* is a game well worth going through a few times, if only to see how the narrative changes on each playthrough.



SINGULARITY

FORMAT: **PC, PS3, 360** RELEASE: **25 June 2010**
CHARTED AT: **It didn't** EXPECT TO PAY: **£5-10**

WHY YOU DIDN'T PLAY IT: When we see little to nothing of a game before boxed copies arrive, alarm bells ring. Activision's seeming decision to bury *Singularity* flew in the face of that standard, though – it turned out to be a really solid and creative FPS.

WHY YOU SHOULD PLAY IT: Quality shooters are no rarity, though they're often easy to see coming. That *Singularity* never really appeared on our radar is a great shame, if only because it was much better than its low profile would suggest. Raven's FPS took many of the concepts of the disappointing *Timeshift* and made them its own, creating a genuine ray of light in a genre swamped with *Call Of Duty* copycats.



ENSLAVED: ODYSSEY TO THE WEST

FORMAT: **PS3, 360**
RELEASE: **8 October 2010**
CHARTED AT: **7** EXPECT TO PAY: **£5-10**

WHY YOU DIDN'T PLAY IT: New IPs are notoriously tough to take to market successfully, and launching at the busiest time of the year only makes the process harder still.

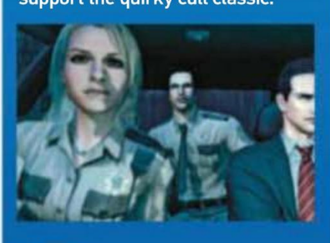
WHY YOU *SHOULD* PLAY IT: Even with a quality dev team, Hollywood acting and writing talent and a professional soundtrack, success was not to be for this reimagining of the *Journey To The West* fable. It's one of the most prominent examples of how new IPs are risky, and a dangerous glimpse into gaming's future – if you're going to show your support for new original games, there are few stronger horses to back than *Enslaved*.

DEADLY PREMONITION

FORMAT: **360**
RELEASE: **29 October 2010**
CHARTED AT: **It didn't**
EXPECT TO PAY: **£10-15**

WHY YOU DIDN'T PLAY IT: No game has seen so broad a spread of review scores, with a limited release amid the busiest season also helping keep the quirky delight in the shadows.

WHY YOU SHOULD PLAY IT: Divisive to the extreme and extremely niche, nobody expected *Deadly Premonition* to get a PAL release, let alone sell any copies when it unexpectedly did. Still, those that do take the plunge might just find themselves surprised to find that a game so technically shabby can be so damn entertaining. Don't let the short run deny you of a copy, either – it's available on Games On Demand as well, if you'd like to support the quirky cult classic.





MAJIN AND THE FORSAKEN KINGDOM

FORMAT: **PS3, 360**
RELEASE: **26 November 2010**
CHARTED AT: **It didn't**
EXPECT TO PAY: **£10-15**

WHY YOU DIDN'T PLAY IT: Contrary to what those late night teleshopping channels might be so eager to yell, it's hard for something to sell well if it's not available in shops. *Majin*'s lack of retail presence was a saddening turn of events. Like *Muramasa* the previous year, many retailers chose not to stock the new property, leading to minimal visibility and exposure.

WHY YOU SHOULD PLAY IT: While no classic, *Majin And The Forsaken Kingdom* is a charming and enchanting adventure, and the titular Majin himself is one of the most likeable gaming characters in years. If you're still waiting for *The Last Guardian* to materialise, or for *The Legend Of Zelda* to try some fresh ideas, then this is your game.

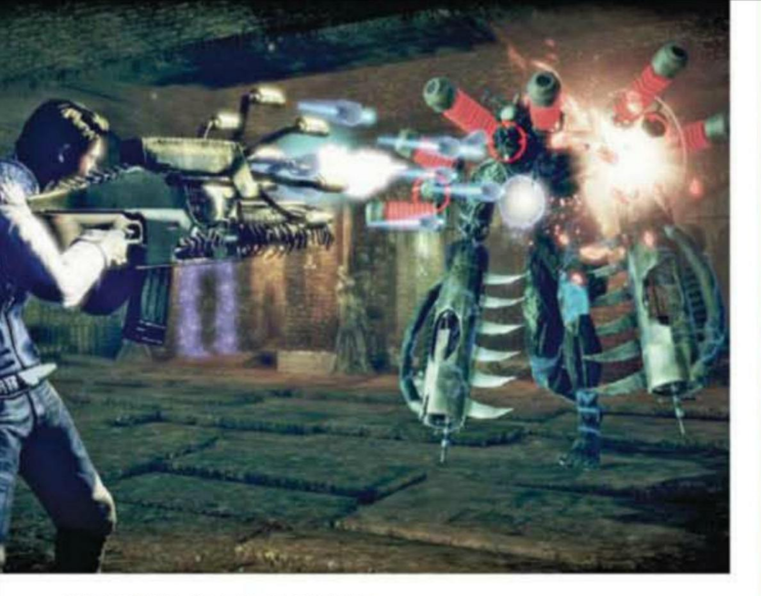
WWE ALL STARS

FORMAT: **3DS, PS2, PS3, PSP, Wii, 360**
RELEASE: **1 April 2011** CHARTED AT: **7** EXPECT TO PAY: **£10-15**

WHY YOU DIDN'T PLAY IT: *All Stars* sat in a curious limbo between official tie-in and arcade game, arriving months after the annual *WWE* title and failing to capitalise on its ability to appeal beyond wrestling fans.

WHY YOU SHOULD PLAY IT: It's rare that **games™** covers wrestling games at all, though that's only because it's rarer still for THQ to deviate from the same template it has been using since the PSone *SmackDown!* games. Here, though, highly stylised Superstars take to the ring in what is effectively an arcade fighter, and it overcomes regular classification to offer an entertaining fighting experience for even those that don't follow the weekly antics of the Sweaty Spandex Brigade.



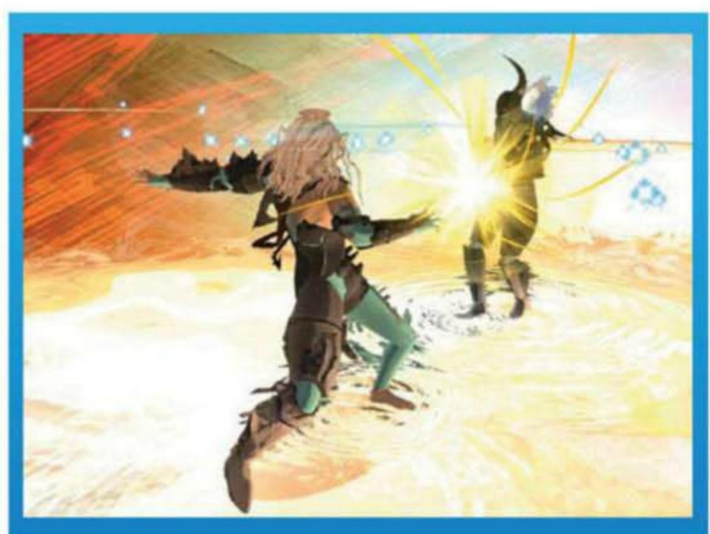


SHADOWS OF THE DAMNED

FORMAT: **PS3, 360** RELEASE: **24 June 2011**
CHARTED AT: **It didn't** EXPECT TO PAY: **£10-15**

WHY YOU DIDN'T PLAY IT: Amid a decent summer for games, Grasshopper's celebration of immaturity didn't have nearly the push it would have needed to be successful.

WHY YOU SHOULD PLAY IT: It's *Resident Evil 4*, as seen through the eyes of a grubby-minded teenager. But that's fine with us. Those crazy Grasshopper chaps sure know how to piece together a great game, and while it might have catered more to gutter-dwelling senses of humour than most gamers, it still ranks among our favourite dark horses of last year. Don't hold your breath for a sequel though, since none of you horrible lot bothered buying it. Shame on you all.



EL SHADDAI: ASCENSION OF THE METATRON

FORMAT: **PS3, 360** RELEASE: **9 September 2011**
CHARTED AT: **It didn't** EXPECT TO PAY: **£5-10**

WHY YOU DIDN'T PLAY IT: With a title that most people couldn't even pronounce and launching on the same week as *Dead Island*, *Space Marine* and *Resistance 3*, Ignition's stylish action game didn't stand a prayer.

WHY YOU SHOULD PLAY IT: *El Shaddai* had a lot going for it in terms of style, though it was equally cursed with elements that would see it ignored. One-button combat scared off a lot of the hardcore *DMC* crew, for instance, while the religious themes managed to offend as they so often do and even that lush visual style didn't sit well with everyone. Still, it's a beautiful game whether you enjoy the rhythmic combat or not, and sometimes that's all it takes to send the hand walletwards. This is a course of action we heartily recommend.



MALICIOUS

FORMAT: **PS3, PS VITA**
RELEASE: **8 February 2012**
CHARTED AT: **It didn't**
EXPECT TO PAY: **£6.49 (ON PSN)**

WHY YOU DIDN'T PLAY IT: Those that really wanted to play it had already cheated the system to grab it from the Japanese PSN store years ago. This particular entry isn't about a game that underperformed; it's about one that snuck onto the PlayStation Store a year and a half after its Japanese launch to little fanfare, one that now lies buried in the archives only to be found by those that seek it out.

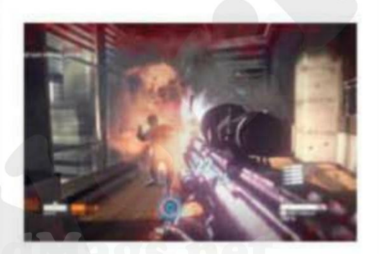
WHY YOU SHOULD PLAY IT: *Malicious* is a clever fusion of boss battles and shooter elements, making it an easy recommendation if you have the patience to wade through the menu mire required to find the damn thing. Its short length makes it feel like a demo for a bigger *DMC*-style adventure. This could and should have been a *Bayonetta* contender.

SYNDICATE

FORMAT: **PC, PS3, 360**
RELEASE: **24 February 2012**
CHARTED AT: **7**
EXPECT TO PAY: **£20-25**

WHY YOU DIDN'T PLAY IT: Some took umbrage with the usage of the classic franchise's name, others with the me-too trailer... *Syndicate* ended up appealing to neither retro gamers nor modern FPS fans.

WHY YOU *SHOULD* PLAY IT: Okay, so it's not *Syndicate* as you know it. And sure, it's just another shooter. But it's a pretty damn good one, elements of *Crysis* fusing with ideas pinched from the classic RTS from which the game takes its name make for a stunning and satisfying slice of cyberpunk silliness. The price will drop further, we're sure, but that'll only make it even more appealing a prospect for those that haven't seen the future yet.



FUTURE FAILURES?

Most of the games featured here have been conveniently forgotten by their publishers, written off as commercial failures and left to live on exclusively as cult classics that never met their full potential. And in a world of me-too shooters and safe sequels, you can be damn sure that the same thing will happen again. But in the case of games like these, it's not too late to make a difference and save them from future obscurity. Here are just a few of the titles that could be in danger of what experts call 'doing an *Enslaved*'... whether they do or not is up to you.

Gravity Rush

■ It's being hailed as Vita's killer app, but with the modest install base and without a big name behind it to help shift units (both of the game and the handheld), *Gravity Rush* is at risk of being another forgotten great. Early games in a console's life often struggle, so can Sony fly in the face of tradition with this original adventure?

Theatrhythm Final Fantasy

■ It might have the world's largest RPG brand attached to it, but between that confusing title, the super-deformed cutesy style and the shift into perilously overplayed rhythm-action territory, it doesn't look good for *Theatrhythm*. We hope people prove us wrong, though – it's a wonderful little game.

Lollipop Chainsaw

■ The history books don't do Grasshopper any favours, though the hope will be that hypersexualised heroine Juliet can deliver where sweary-middle-named Garcia couldn't. Will the *Call Of Duty* generation even consider buying a game with the word 'lollipop' in the title, though? We'll have to wait and see.

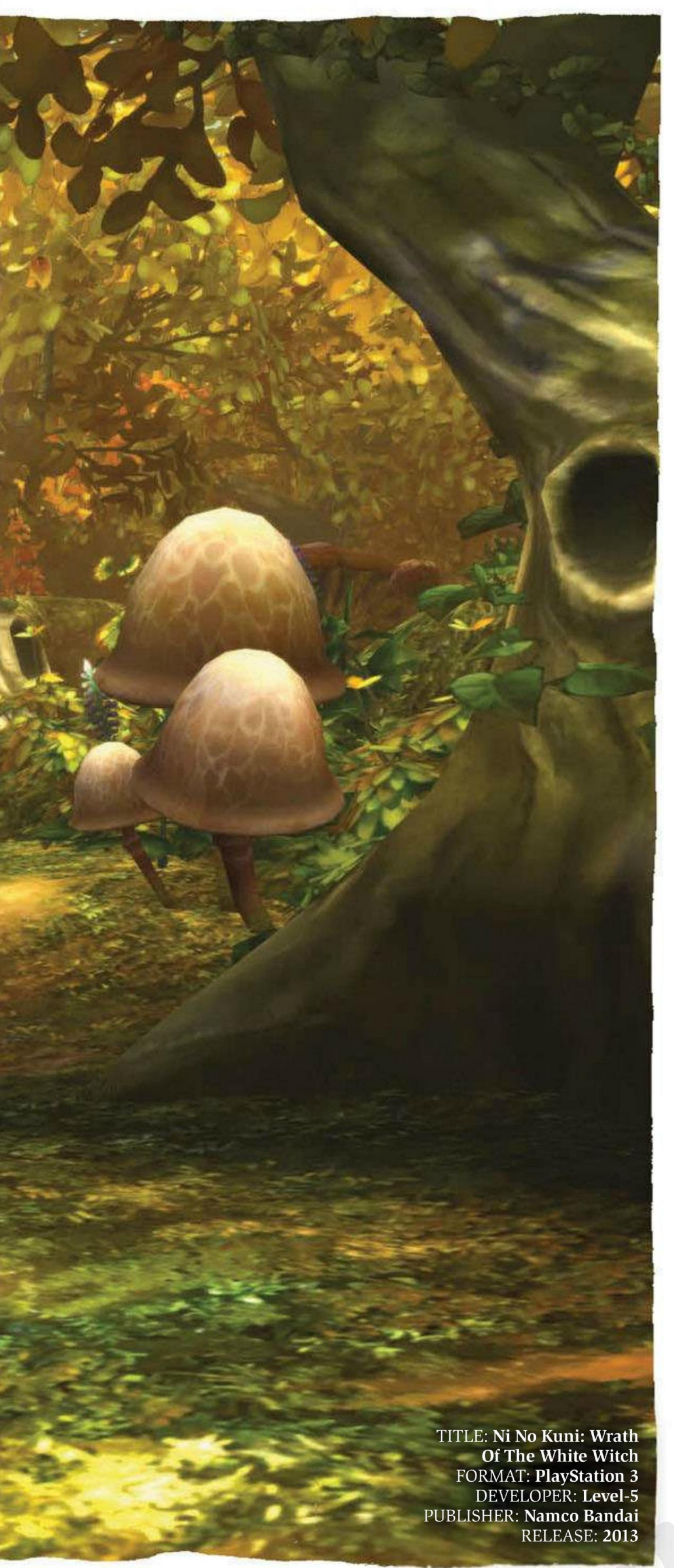
XCOM

■ There's an argument that 2K has shot itself in the foot with this one – announcing a shooter based on the popular strategy franchise reminded fans that they should be kicking off about the change of direction, with the following announcement of a true strategy game turning all attention away from the FPS spin-off. It actually looks pretty slick, too...



The Beautiful Game

Inside Studio Ghibli and Level-5's stunning collaboration



TITLE: **Ni No Kuni: Wrath Of The White Witch**
FORMAT: **PlayStation 3**
DEVELOPER: **Level-5**
PUBLISHER: **Namco Bandai**
RELEASE: **2013**

It's with dropped jaws, blown minds and smacked gobs that we declare Ni No Kuni: Wrath Of The White Witch the most stunning game on PlayStation 3. The logical conclusion of the art of cel-shading, it's more than just a videogame – it's the kind of interactive cartoon that gaming has been threatening to deliver since Dragon's Lair, a perfect fusion of the look and feel of one of Japan's leading animation studios and the gaming smarts of a team at the top of its craft. ***games™*** *speaks to Level-5 about bridging media, resuscitating the JRPG and the trials of working with an animation studio whose key figures have an open dislike for videogames...*

WHEN THE STUDIO that has been at the helm of the *Dragon Quest* franchise for the best part of a decade announces a new game, the hardcore know to sit up and take notice. But for those less familiar with Level-5's illustrious track record, it takes something a little more obvious to stoke the Hype Train's engine. Enter Studio Ghibli (the Japanese animation studio behind the Oscar-winning *Spirited Away*, among a host of other classics), lending not only the team's wonderful artistry but also its storytelling prowess to *Ni No Kuni: Wrath Of The White Witch* in a bid to sell the JRPG to a whole new audience. Will it work? It already has – try telling us that you don't want to play a game that looks this beautiful.

It's no great secret that the JRPG has been in turmoil for some time now, the radical changes made to *Final Fantasy XIII* are as telling a sign as any that developers are desperate to breathe new life into the genre in whatever way they can. For Square Enix, this meant a bold and divisive new structure with the production values of a CG movie; for tri-Ace, it meant an action-centric slant and an ocean of crazy innovations to make *Resonance Of Fate* a truly unique proposition; for Level-5, it means evolving its frequently seen cel-shading to a level where it genuinely looks like hand-drawn animation with the help of one of the biggest names in the business. All laudable branches to follow in the evolution of the genre, sure, but of the bunch, Level-5's choice of direction has the most potential to turn the genre around and see the kinds of numbers that games like *Final Fantasy VII* enjoyed in the JRPG's heyday.

But given that Studio Ghibli's Hayao Miyazaki has openly spoken out about his disdain for videogames, how did this collaboration come about in the first place? *Ni No Kuni* was originally conceived as a tenth anniversary project for Level-5, a chance for the team to cut loose from the trappings of licences and expectations with a vanity project that celebrated everything the studio stood for. Level-5 president Akihiro Hino was reportedly introduced to the Ghibli team by musician Naoya Fujimaki (a mutual acquaintance who had worked on projects for both studios), although the animation house wasn't immediately on board.

"WE HAD THE opportunity to meet [Toshio] Suzuki at Studio Ghibli several times, and we asked if they would like to create the animation for our new project," Hino tells us. "They initially liked the concept, but didn't feel that the title was very fitting. That's when we proposed *Ni No Kuni*, since it was a story about going back and forth between the two worlds." *Ni No Kuni* literally translates to 'The Second Land' or 'Another World', and while it hasn't been revealed what that original name was, it's perhaps telling of Ghibli's sway that it should be both changed in the first place and retained worldwide – Ghibli's films generally have weird and wonderful titles that capture the imagination,

and *Ni No Kuni* does just that, hence why Ghibli ended up starting work on animation for the game soon after.

SPEAKING ON JAPANESE radio, Studio Ghibli president Toshio Suzuki gave a little more insight into the origins of the project. "In the past we have had other videogame offers, but we never acted on them due to bad timing. We would usually have no interest and reject such offers," Suzuki states. "But when I met Hino, he talked passionately about his work. I got to know he lives and works in Kyushu and that he is an honest and good person. I was wondering at first, but in no time at all we began working with him." With little to no gaming knowledge in the studio, it's unlikely that Ghibli was even aware of the pedigree of the developer that was knocking on its door, which is perhaps why Suzuki still seems a little edgy about the collaboration. "Normally we wouldn't have done it, but *Ponyo* was just about to debut in theatres, and our heads were still running full tilt. He caught us right when we were at our weakest!" he laughs, and he's not the only one seemingly surprised that the deal was struck in the first place. "I think Hino really had luck on his side," concurs Fujimaki, who is also on the broadcast interview. "The whole Ghibli team was free of work at that time. Miyazaki may say that he hates games, but being a businessman, Suzuki can't just let his staff do nothing all day!"



It's rare to see gameplay and cut-scenes fused so seamlessly, especially amazing given the two different styles.



It might sound like Ghibli got involved for want of anything better to do, though the amount of time and effort the studio sank into the project is proof that it took it a little more seriously than that. Working at full capacity, Studio Ghibli can produce approximately five minutes of movie-grade animation per month, and it invested the best part of a year in *Ni No Kuni*'s animated cut-scenes, plus additional time assisting in story and character elements as well as in-engine scenes.

THE IDEA WAS TO CREATE A WORLD FULL OF LIFE AND VIBRANCY THAT EVOKES THE HEART-WARMING FEELING OF A STUDIO GHIBLI ANIME

THIS ASPECT WAS something of a learning process for the Ghibli guys, who have little experience in the gaming field. "It was very much about teaching them what the game production process entails," Hino confirms. "In turn, we learned a lot from them with regard to animation-type storytelling. Even with the 3D real-time events, they supervised all the storyboards and gave us directions on very minute details right down to the smallest movements; this ensures that *Ni No Kuni* very much reflects a Studio Ghibli animation, and you'll be able to see that in the finished product."

In truth, you needn't even wait that long – the recent trailer is all over the web and, with the game having been out in Japan since the end of last year, there are stacks of YouTube videos that sing of the game's beauty as long as you're comfortable with tiptoeing through the spoiler minefield. Static images really don't do the game justice, everything from regular routines and idle animations to incidental interactions and subtle details laced with the care and attention that Studio Ghibli movies exude so effortlessly. The cel-shaded look itself is nothing new for Level-5 – *Dark Chronicle* and *Dragon Quest VIII* were two of the PS2's best examples of the expressive art style – but here, gaming's anime disguise is taken to an entirely new level. "We're very comfortable with that style, but that's not to say that we don't want to do more realistic-looking games or challenge different types of styles," Hino tells us. "Even looking at *Ni No Kuni*, it's a very advanced type of

Each town has its own feel and culture, to the point where visitors stand out.



















graphical technique – a lot of the time when you use cel-shading there are awkward shadows cast on faces, but we have a system which allows for the removal of those types of shadows to create a real hand-drawn image."

And it's not just the look and feel that is reminiscent of Ghibli's catalogue, either. Although Level-5 (and more specifically Hino) is primarily responsible for the narrative of *Ni No Kuni* – which sees young Oliver whisked away to a fantasy land in search of a way to bring back his recently deceased mother – it would have been foolish to turn down the assistance of the world-class storytellers already helping out on the project. "The idea was to create a world full of life and vibrancy that evokes the heart-warming feeling of a Studio Ghibli anime," recalls Hino. "They didn't bring any new ideas to development per se, but they did have a lot of input regarding the storytelling elements and characters. They had a lot of feedback and advice about the directions of particular scenes, but in terms of the game systems and the more technical elements, they are obviously not a game developer, so they did not have much input."

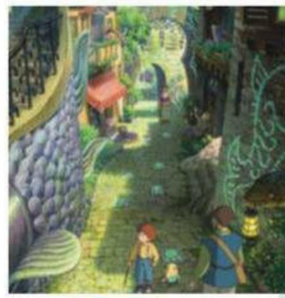


HINO GOES on to give more specific examples of where Ghibli suggested changes to particular scenes, leading to one of the only times we've ever had to dodge spoilers in an interview environment. It's a double-edged sword, on the one side revealing information we'd rather have found out through the proper channels but at the same time showcasing just how much mutual respect there was between the two companies in search of the perfect narrative. The story itself, while quite typical for a JRPG, is also laced with similar themes to those seen in Ghibli movies. "At first, Oliver is overcome by sadness and he has no desire to set out on a journey,"

It's no exaggeration to say that we'd walk to the ends of the Earth with Drippy trailing behind our every step.

Compare/ Contrast

The major draw of *Ni No Kuni* is the ability to cut between rendered gameplay and drawn anime sequences seamlessly and, in this respect, it certainly doesn't disappoint. While the transition into and out of the Blu-ray-quality animation is noticeable, it's certainly not jarring in the least, and it's hard to see how Level-5 could have come any closer to matching the world-class standard of Ghibli's animation with its in-engine scenes and gameplay. Don't believe us? Cast your eyes over a few shots of the art and the game itself, and feel that doubt flow from your body...





The art (top) does a great job of echoing the freedom of exploration that Ni No Kuni affords players.





Even the recruitable monsters get the anime treatment. Let's play Spot The Difference...

says Hino, drawing a parallel to the reluctant protagonists of Ghibli classics like *Princess Mononoke* and *Spirited Away*. "But he matures into someone who makes a difference in other people's lives. It shows Oliver's progression from a child into an adult, so that's definitely something we'd like children to see as well."

This push for universal appeal extends to a gameplay level as well, and while *Ni No Kuni* calls upon Level-5's vast JRPG experience for many of its core mechanics, there's a simplicity and fluidity to the whole thing that allows it to strike a glorious balance between playing a game and simply getting drunk on the gorgeous setting. Drippy, a stuffed toy given life by Oliver's tears, is your tour guide as you explore the vast and varied world. He's the excitable little chap with a lantern on his nose, and his thick Welsh accent might just be exactly what has been missing from JRPGs all these years – either way, more games should experiment with having characters describe successful endeavors as 'tidy'. The watercolour overworld is expansive and full of danger (all of which handily makes itself known in the form of roaming creatures – we'll not mourn the death of random encounters any time soon) but whether you explore on foot, by boat or from the skies, it's just such a well-realised and inviting place that you can easily lose hours just looking around. *Oblivion*'s 300 square miles of brown this is not.

BUT BACK TO the gameplay, because as we all know, the true test of a JRPG is in how well its battle system holds up. *Ni No Kuni* fares remarkably well in this respect – it's a conceptual collision of *Star Ocean*, *Pokémon* and *Final Fantasy XIII-2*, albeit one that is far more slick and coherent than that mess sounds. While you'll have three party members at any given time (plus Drippy, although how much he contributes to combat beyond occasionally pointing out enemy weaknesses and generally egging you on is unclear), you only take

“” Ghibli In Quotes

Japan's leading animation studio, in its own words

"I think that if you are very genuine in doing films for young children, you must aim for their heads, not deciding for them what will be too much for them to handle. What we found was that the children actually understand the movies more than adults"

Hayao Miyazaki[1]

"One thing that I have learned from past experience is that it is impossible to create something truly worthy if you cannot move the hearts of those working on the project"

Goro Miyazaki[1]

"I think CGI has the potential to equal or even surpass what the human hand can do. But it is far too late for me to try it"

Hayao Miyazaki[3]

"It would be difficult to make a film that implicitly expresses that a bright future is assured… But I do hope that the audience would be touched by the strong spirit of the two main characters, who do not lower their heads but persevere onwards, despite the harsh realities"

Grave Of The Fireflies director Hiromasa Yonebayashi[7]

"If you let me have my own way, I'd first reduce the amount of manga, videogames, and weekly magazines… I think we should let our children watch animation only once or twice a year, and ban cram school as well. If we let children have more of their own time and have their own way, they'll become more lively in a year or so"

Hayao Miyazaki[9]

"I am a pessimist. But when I'm making a film, I don't want to transfer my pessimism onto children. I keep it at bay"

Hayao Miyazaki[4]

"Money is money because people think it is, but it's nothing but a piece of paper"

Toshio Suzuki[8]



"All of the videogames or the films water the young spectators of these universes… Aesthetically speaking, these works tend towards ultra-realism, either using real photos which are manipulated using a computer or using 3D often blurring the border between the real world and the 'fantasy' world. The problem with this is that when the young people find themselves in reality, they find it dull and depressing and only dream of living in a factitious universe. I think this is a shame and consider it dangerous"

Isao Takahata[5]

"We have to be cautious in using this word 'fantasy'. In Japan, the word is applied to everything from TV shows to videogames, like virtual reality. But virtual reality is a denial of reality. We need to be open to imagination, which brings something useful to reality. Virtual reality can imprison people. It's a dilemma I struggle with in my work – that balance between imaginary worlds and virtual worlds"

Hayao Miyazaki[1]

"Hayao Miyazaki, to me, is 'Zero Marks as a Father, Full Marks as a Director'"

Goro Miyazaki

"Honestly, I don't watch much anime. I think there are not many good ones… do I sound like a snob?"

Toshio Suzuki[6]

"When making a film, I use all my childhood memories: these are things that can help us in life"

Hayao Miyazaki[1]

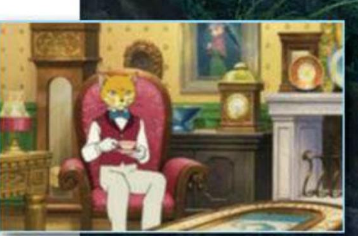
"I get inspiration from my real life. I think of my real life as extending about 300 metres radius up from me, so what I see within that area is what inspires me"

Hayao Miyazaki[2]

1 Little White Lies, July 2007 **2** **SciFiNow**, February 2010 **3** The Guardian, September 2005 **4** Midnight Eye, July 2002 **5** GhibliWorld, February 2006 **6** Nausicaa.net, June 2005 **7** Empire Online, 2011 **8** Wall Street Journal, October 2006 **9** Animage, May 2001

THE DNA OF NI NO KUNI

STUDIO GHIBLI



ANIMALS ARE PEOPLE TOO

■ From starring roles to supporting cast members, Ghibli's catalogue is full of chatty anthropomorphic animals. Venture into Hamelin, *Ni No Kuni*'s underground steampunk pig city, and you can't move for bipedal porcine characters – Ghibli fans will know to expect the unexpected.

HUSHED TONES

■ While *Dragon Quest VIII* was painted from a *Dragon Ball* palette of vivid primary colours, Ghibli's output tends to be that much more subdued, and that's something that also comes across in *Ni No Kuni*. It should also be apparent in the soundtrack, scored by longtime Ghibli composer Joe Hisaishi, as much known for his restraint and deliberate moments of silence as his bombastic orchestrations.





CHILD PROTAGONIST

■ OLIVER MAY be a departure for Level-5, which usually sticks with young adults as its protagonists, but for Studio Ghibli he's about as typical as a hero gets. Almost every Miyazaki film features a realistic child protagonist that its target audience can relate to, with the more adult themed *Princess Mononoke* proving a rare exception.



THE WELSH CONNECTION

■ WHILE Drippy's Welsh accent represents an attempt to add regional flavour to the journey, it may also be something to come straight from Miyazaki himself. The Ghibli director is famed for his love of Wales, and was even inspired by the Welsh miner's strike of 1984 to create the opening scenes of *Laputa*.

LEVEL-5

GAMES AS ART

■ LEVEL-5 HAS a wonderful way of integrating gameplay features into its titles without breaking the lore and feel, something it does brilliantly with *Ni No Kuni*'s magic book. The book came with the DS version (which, it seems, won't be getting a release outside of Japan) but here it's brought to life as an animated in-game tome.

COMIC RELIEF

■ GHIBLI'S FILMS tend to feature at most a subtle level of humour while Level-5 takes a totally different tack in tickling the giggle box, as evidenced by *Dragon Quest IX*'s vast hoard of terrible puns. Expect *Ni No Kuni* to strike a balance between the two, but to likely fall more on the Level-5 side, especially if ever-amusing sidekick Drippy has anything to do with it.





IN YOUR OWN TIME

■ MOVIES ARE all about telling a linear narrative, but Level-5 understands that games have to be more open-ended and offer players the chance to follow the story at their own pace. Side-quests and simple exploration will both make sure that nobody feels rushed through the core narrative. *Professor Layton*'s ability to skip between exploration, puzzle solving and animated cut-scenes is testament to this.



SELF DEFENCE

■ LEVEL-5'S PROVEN track record in RPG development perfectly positions it to create a combat system that fits the feel and pace of what is essentially a playable animated movie. Fights, like those of late PS2 RPG *Rogue Galaxy*, have the same level of detail and leap off the screen as much as any cut-scene, making each and every one an absolute joy.

direct control of one of them at a time. This can be switched freely at will, as can who or what fills that particular slot – each of the human characters has a selection of *Pokémon*-esque allies they can call upon to replace them in battle. To make matters easier, life bars and MP are shared between master and monsters, so it's almost like *FFXIII*'s Paradigm system rather than a genuine character swap. Real-time movement also adds a degree of strategy to combat not seen in many menu-based RPGs, and with each of the allied monsters falling into a particular elemental group, there's much more to think about than simply rushing in and mashing buttons, which *will* get you killed – you might switch to a fire-type monster and move to intercept and absorb a fireball attack on behalf of an ally, for instance, or have to flit between members to make sure they all use the monster partners that best exploit a boss's weakness.

"At first glance, *Ni No Kuni: Wrath Of The White Witch* might look like a typical JRPG," Hino explains as we lay waste to a porcine tank boss called Porco Grosso, not the first and certainly not the last piece of amusing Ghibli fan service in the game. But make no mistake about it…. this is no *Kingdom Hearts*-style celebration of characters and settings, rather a celebration of the ethos, attitude and overall feel of the two studios involved. "We really challenged ourselves to provide something new and exciting," he continues, and it is. While it would have been all too easy to simply go back to the *Dragon Quest* template and paste in some Ghibli, Level-5 demonstrates a commendable level of creativity in both ideas that deepen gameplay and ones that allow a broader view of a world clearly crafted with love and attention.



Part tree, part frog, all awesome. The imagination evident in the world is never anything short of astounding.

More than feeling any pressure, we contemplated how far we could go to replicate the Studio Ghibli universe

THE ONE WORRY here is that *Ni No Kuni*'s high-profile collaboration might see it caught somewhere between game and movie, a dangerous limbo where it tries too hard to tell a traditional story to fulfil the needs of the hardcore but gets held back on a narrative level by enforced gaming conceits. Given the crossover between cinematic storytelling and JRPGs as well as the standards of the two parties collaborating, we find it hard to believe that could be the case, though it's still a concern we ask Hino to allay. "I don't really see it like that," he says, stamping his authority on the conversation. "Currently I am a game designer but I also handle scripts and scenarios for anime series in Japan, and I've also been involved with movie scripts. So, in that sense, whether it be a game or an anime that incorporates a bunch of different types of creators, the worlds and tones it generates can be more interesting when incorporating all three elements into one."

Still, he seems to understand the concern that some people might have, especially those that don't buy into concepts like *Heavy Rain*'s exploration of interactive narrative and would rather just see games be games and films be films.

"Some people are defensive because all these different types of content have their respective histories – even anime has always been pitted against live-action films," Hino says. "So, where anime creators may be focused on the psyche of humans, game creators may have tended to focus on the freedom of their characters and different types of motion; these histories for the different types of content means some people are still tied up in those parameters and so get defensive about their particular medium."













Confident he may be, but with something so inherently exciting as a playable Studio Ghibli work in his hands, there's a whole lot of pressure on Hino and the rest of his team to deliver a game that lives up to the potential of the concept. Or at least we'd have expected there to be. Hino, however, shrugs it off. "More than feeling any pressure, we contemplated how far we could go to replicate the Studio Ghibli universe. We strived to showcase *Ni No Kuni*'s magnificent world by utilising the full capabilities of the hardware, and we hope everyone will enjoy adventuring in this other world," he says. "We also hope that fans will find Studio Ghibli's animation and Joe Hisaishi's musical score to be the same high level of quality that they are accustomed to in their other works."

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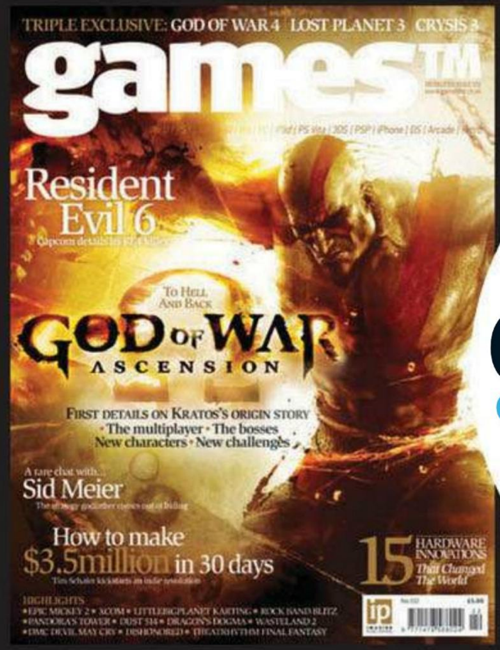
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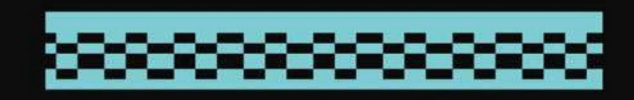
WHY I ♥...

Manic Miner

GARY BRACEY
OCEAN SOFTWARE, VP OF DEVELOPMENT (1985-1994)

WITHOUT A doubt my favourite game would have to be one I was involved with at Ocean, as it would represent the amazing experience of having collaborated with some of the best developers in the business. But that is a more personal perspective, which would automatically exclude the aforementioned as I would have been too close to them to be objective. If I had to pick one, I'd go with Manic Miner, *as it was the one game that set me on my path to work in videogames. It was the first game that truly hooked me and made me see the entertainment value in the medium, before which was just perceived as a temporary (and trivial) fad.* Manic Miner *was an amazing game, made more extraordinary by the fact it was conceived, designed, drawn and coded by one person. This was* The Jazz Singer *of videogames – it laid the groundwork for the generation.*

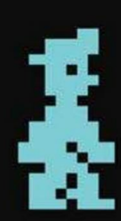




The M

AIR

High Score 000





> "Manic Miner was an amazing game, made even more extraordinary by the fact it was conceived, designed, drawn and coded by one person"
>
> GARY BRACEY, FORMER VP OF DEVELOPMENT, OCEAN SOFTWARE



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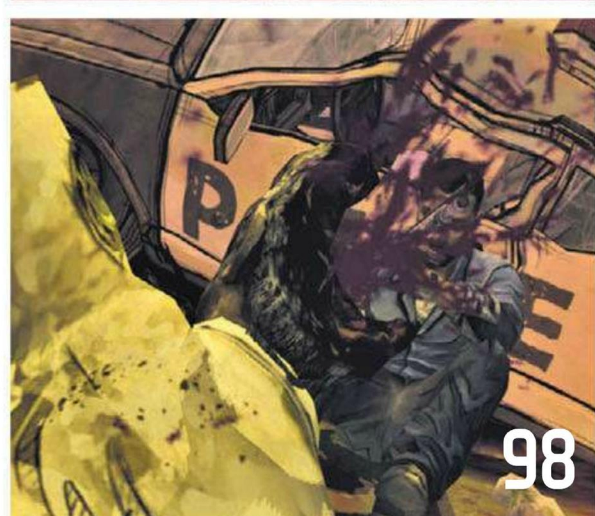
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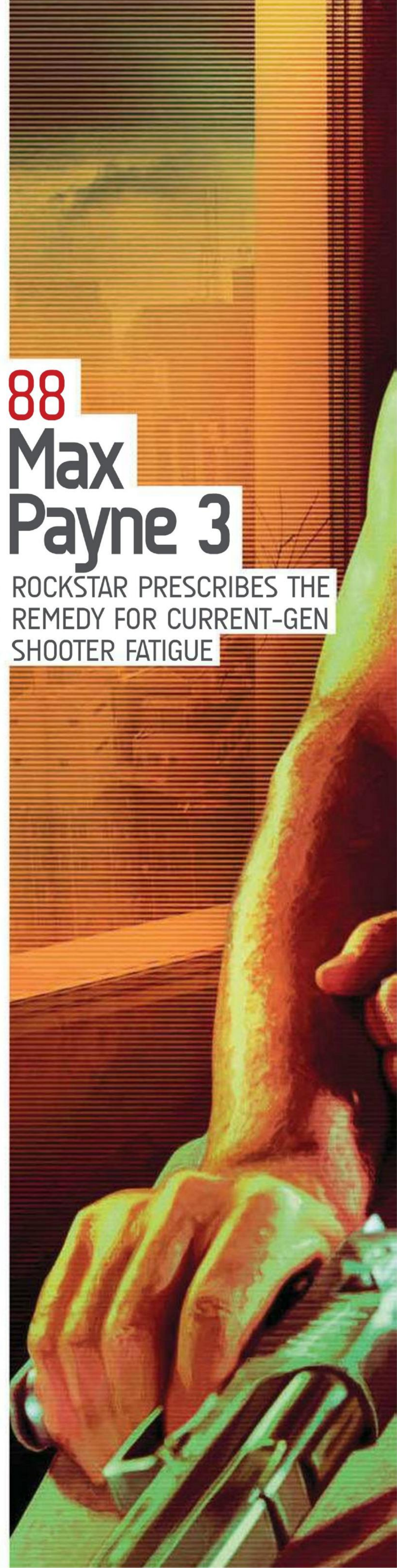
THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest – we'd never let that happen, and besides you'd smell it a mile off. And finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact, they are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists, designed to enlighten, inform, and engage. The gospel according to **games™**.















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THE AUCTION HOUSE GAMBLE

It wasn't available at launch, but all eyes are nevertheless on *Diablo III*'s real money auction house, which is by equal measure both crazy and brilliant. In effect, it codifies the grey market once dominated by E3, enabling players to make real-world money on their hard-won yet intangibly imaginary in-game loot. However, it would also seem to open the door for gold farmers. And what will happen when little Johnny gets hold of his mother's credit card and spends $100 on an epic bow? It feels rather sleazy of Blizzard to be profiting off the bad decisions of others (it gets a cut of every single transaction), but profit it will. Whether or not it's a good idea for *Diablo III* – or the industry as a whole – will be clear soon enough.







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Diablo III

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OTHER FORMATS: Mac
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Activision Blizzard
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1 (2-4 Online)
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows XP/Vista/7, Intel Pentium D 2.8 GHz or Athlon 64 X2 4400+, NVIDIA GeForce 7800 GT or ATI Radeon X1950 Pro or better, 1 GB of RAM (XP) 1.5 GB of RAM (Vista/7), 12 GB HD Space
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

For all its means, Blizzard is a company that still prefers the subtle. It works behind the scenes, tweaking this and that, making sure that all the moving parts are working just right. And before you know it, you've been playing the developer's games for five years. *Diablo III* fits right into that template, as does *StarCraft II*, which is now almost two years old and still going strong. It plays much as it did a decade ago with its randomly-generated dungeons and point-and-click combat, the majority of the changes being under the hood. But as the game goes on and the changes pile up, it becomes apparent that, yes, *Diablo III* has changed a great deal in the past decade. And yes, it's still a great dungeon crawler. The story picks up with one of five classes, each of which straddles the line between basic template and full-fledged character. Characters like the Demon Hunter are technically nameless archetypes, but their backstories are fleshed out through narrated cut-scenes, and through random dialogue. One of our favourite moments comes in Act II, when a powerful sorcerer tempts our character with the promise of power.

"With your bloodline, you could be a god, you know," he taunts.

Blizzard doesn't go much further than that in developing characters, but it doesn't need to. Imagination is more than enough to take things from there. In general, the developer is very good about not beating players over the head with its carefully crafted universe. Even the medieval audio logs sprinkled throughout each dungeon manage not to jar too heavily, adding additional colour to the point-and-click bloodletting.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

THE FUTURE?: Expect more PC developers to follow the template put down here. It stems the piracy endemic to the platform, and it probably won't be long before every game is online, whether you like it or not.

Below: *Diablo III* retains the demonic feel that characterised the previous games with covens and evil rituals. They often take centre-stage in random events and sub-quests.

THE STORY IS FULL OF SET-PIECE BATTLES, EACH MORE GRANDIOSE THAN THE LAST



Left: A.I. companions are omnipresent through your adventure, and they always have something interesting to say. The Paladin is heroic to the point of irritation, while the Scoundrel is amusingly caustic.

Left: Blizzard uses in-game cut-scenes and CGI to tell its story. But its best-looking sequences are the ones that look like an ancient tome come to life.



As for the story itself, it's clear that Blizzard intends for *Diablo III* to be a grand finale of sorts for the trilogy. Old locations return, there are constant references to the battles of previous games, and the stakes feel higher than usual. The scope of *Diablo III* is greater even than that of the second game, which moved the story out of the tiny village of Tristram and into the world at large. The story is full of set-piece battles, each more grandiose than the last, which only serve to hammer home the point that, yes, this is the end. One of the best moments in the game comes amid a massive battle between human and demon, followed by a seemingly suicidal charge through enemy lines. It's here that Blizzard's sense of the cinematic and the pure, fast-paced action come together to become something special.

But as mentioned earlier, Blizzard deals best in the subtle, and there's never any doubt where the focus of *Diablo III* lies. Even after the final battle is completed and the credits roll, your warrior is still there, ready for the next difficulty level. As such, the balance between the classes, the skills, and the loot get the bulk of Blizzard's attention, which is for the best.

We can already see the debates starting to brew over whether the Barbarian is overpowered, or the Demon Hunter is underpowered, and that may indeed be an issue on Hardcore – the infamous difficulty mode in which characters can die permanently. But on Normal mode, at least, all of the classes are perfectly viable, and the challenge is well-balanced and engaging. Everything clicks at around level 20, which is to say that it's the point where the player starts to welcome crowds of monsters, safe in the knowledge that they have the tools to wipe them out wholesale. But at the same time, death is always just around the corner for the complacent or the foolhardy, especially when facing Heralds of Pestilence and their powerful poison attacks.

The well-balanced difficulty is aided in part by the overhauled skill system, which provides a great deal of flexibility in putting together a build. Every character class has dozens of active and passive skills that are unlocked throughout the game, and every one of those skills has multiple runes that can change the very nature of the ability.

It may not seem like much, but after unlocking all four active skills and all three passive skills, plus a whole of runes, the build possibilities become simply mind-boggling. We didn't settle on a final build until the very last dungeon, constantly experimenting with this skill and that rune until settling on what felt like a good combination. Even now, we're not entirely convinced that there isn't still a better loadout for us to find, which as far as we're concerned is the best possible reason to keep playing.

The other, rather more nefarious, way that Blizzard keeps players hooked is through the achievements. Naturally, achievements aren't exactly new, but they do have a unique psychological effect in *Diablo III* that takes its cues from modern console gaming. Whenever players log in, they are quickly inundated with notifications that their dungeon-crawling friends have reached level 20, defeated a demon lord, or completed one of the random events. It encourages a constant back-and-forth of

FAQs

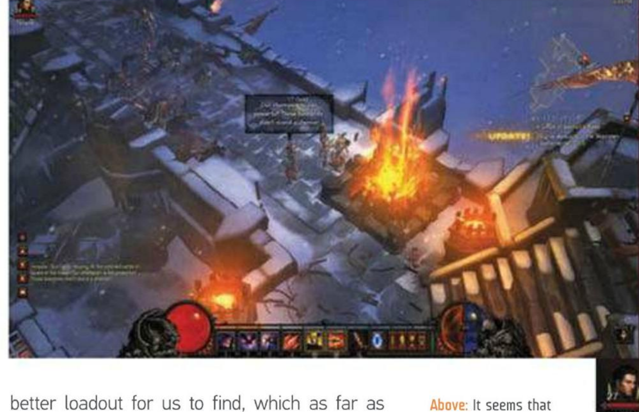
Q. HOW DOES THE MATCHMAKING WORK?
It's possible to join pick-up groups in your level range through an easily accessible menu. You can also open your game to the public and have other players at your level join in. Particularly nice is the ability to simply Quick Join a friend's game, even if you're Level 40 and they're Level 3.

Q. HOW LONG DOES THE CAMPAIGN TAKE TO FINISH?
The campaign consists of four acts with roughly ten major quests apiece. The average completion time varies between 12 and 20 hours, depending on how much exploring you do.

Q. IS THERE ANY POST-GAME CONTENT?
After the campaign is complete, your character is sent back to the beginning of the game with all of their armour, experience and skills intact. From there you can try again at a higher difficulty level, or start a new game with a new character class.



Right: *Diablo III*'s graphics are fairly pedestrian. Where it shines is in the art direction, which consistently delivers.



Above: It seems that Blizzard can't resist taking a page from a certain fantasy classic. You can almost hear the theme from the films playing here.

THE LIMITATIONS OF THE ONLINE-ONLY PLATFORM HAVE BEEN PAINFULLY CLEAR SINCE LAUNCH

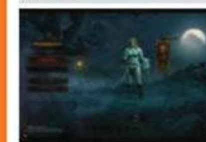
Below: *Diablo III* has quite a few mini-bosses and bosses. But when one of the Lords of Hell show up, Blizzard doesn't mess around. Huge demons like these are relatively common. Luckily, they aren't too hard to take down.



TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

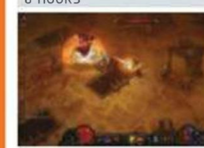
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

05 MINS



Just getting started. Every character looks suitably pathetic in the early going, but that goes double for Barbarians, who look like they left the house half-ready for work.

6 HOURS



You're well into Act II, where you will find yourself in the midst of a sweltering desert. The setting recalls *Diablo II*, which also spent quite a bit of its runtime amid the sands.

10 HOURS



The beginning of Act III throws you into an epic battle between human forces and demons. The fight atop the wall and the subsequent breakout is one of the best set-pieces in the game.

Below: Blizzard's customarily excellent computer-generated cut-scenes are in excellent form in *Diablo III*. They are rare, but when they appear, they are breathtaking.



one-upmanship between players, and adds further compulsion to an already addictive gaming experience. But it also adds to *Diablo III*'s overarching online infrastructure, which effectively turns *Diablo* into a single-player MMORPG that's only a half-step removed from *World Of WarCraft*. The benefits of such a setup for Blizzard are obvious. It limits cheating (a huge issue since the beginning of *Diablo*), cuts down on piracy, and makes it that much easier to integrate the online matchmaking and the new auction house.

Nonetheless, the limitations of the online-only platform have become pretty clear since launch. It has resulted in moments in which every enemy on the screen has simply frozen, then abruptly sped up, as if caught in a time warp. We've lost progress (and yes, gear) to blips in the server connection. And most galling of all, we've had intense boss fights interrupted by Blizzard taking the servers offline for maintenance. There are times when everything has gelled nicely – as when we opened up our game to the public and got a nice pick-up group together for the final boss battle – and there are times when we have had to restrain ourselves so we don't throw our *Diablo III* disc out the window.

Indeed, as long as we're complaining, we're also disappointed that Blizzard is continuing the age-old PC tradition of promising a feature, then patching it in later. Both the 'real money' auction house and player-versus-player combat are much-hyped features that missed the game's launch. It feels strange to be playing such a finely-tuned machine of an RPG, but to know that certain parts are missing from under the hood.

Over the next few years though, we expect that the difficult launch and the missing features will be seen as mere growing pains – and yes, we do think that a lot of people will still be playing *Diablo III* in a few years. Maybe not as many as *StarCraft II* or *World Of WarCraft* – hardcore *Diablo* players are a fairly specialised breed – but enough to warrant the occasional additional content drop. After all, *Diablo III* isn't really finished until you've hit level 60 and kitted out your character in all epic loot, which is a quest that goes well beyond the scope of the initial playthrough.

It's moot to comment upon whether *Diablo III* lives up to the long-building hype, as expectations will vary even more widely than usual between the casual consumer and the hardcore fan. However, the close attention to detail given to capturing the look and feel of the first two *Diablo* games – even down to using the original sound effects – should tell you all you need to know about Blizzard's approach to the rest of the game.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

INTO THE DEPTHS: *Diablo III* isn't lacking for replayability, but it could do with taking a page from *Torchlight* and introducing a never-ending dungeon for fans to explore to their heart's content.

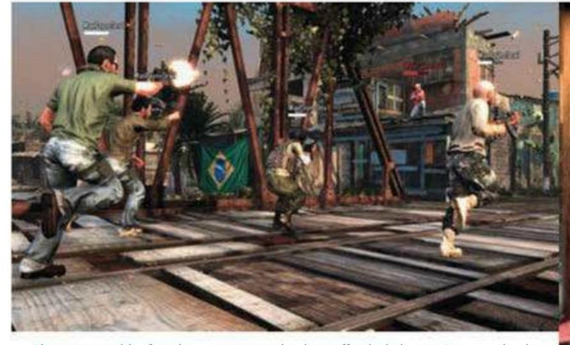
VERDICT 8/10

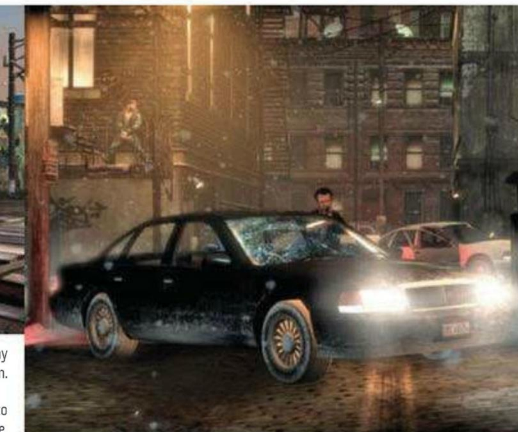
BLIZZARD SUCCEEDS AGAIN, DESPITE CRAZY EXPECTATIONS

WHERE OTHER THIRD-PERSON SHOOTERS WOULD FORCE YOU INTO CONSERVATIVELY USING COVER, MAX PAYNE 3 DEMANDS YOU DIVE IN WITH GUSTO

GROUP PAYNE!

Max Payne 3's multiplayer not only manages to transpose the high-stress action of Max's single-player shenanigans into the online arena with much success, but Rockstar has borrowed heavily from the FPS genre and given it a robust player progression system. There are tonnes of unlockable weapons, Bullet Time-derived abilities and even customisable gear to earn. Its Deathmatch modes are frantic fun, as is the tag-based Payne Killer, which sees players killing each other to become Max and Passos and score points. But it's the excellent Gang Wars mode, which pits sixteen players in four random rounds of play including Capture the Flag, Domination and Team Death Match on massive maps, that promises to keep players engaged long after the solo campaign has become a bloody blur of a memory.





Above: Its wealth of modes – not to mention how effectively it puts Payne-style play into a multiplayer mould – make *Max Payne 3*'s online content an excellent addition.

Right: Combat is frantic and bloody, and, while offence is rewarded, you'll often need to think about how to use the environment to take best advantage of features like Bullet Time.

ANOTHER MAGIC NEW YORK MINUTE

Max Payne 3

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PlayStation 3, PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Rockstar Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1 (2-16 Online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

It's never easy redefining an old hero for the current age or bringing back an old favourite. All too often, changes in both the culture at large and gaming itself make it hard for something to retain its relevance without major alteration to the template that made it successful in the first place. Max Payne is arguably such a character, so steeped in early-2000s gaming tropes that his return could have easily been handled the wrong way. While the original games were elevated by the way Remedy wrapped its action shooters in a clever pastiche of hard-boiled action cinema, crime noir and Norse mythology, that approach could arguably have fallen flat in 2012 – it would simply come off as cheesy or, worse still, feel like a tired re-tread of old ground long since covered.

Thankfully for the tortured New York detective's fans, Rockstar is clearly aware of the double-barrelled challenge it has set itself in bringing back Max and his particularly bombastic style of shooter play for Max Payne 3. This isn't quite the same maniacally grinning, gun-toting detective we all remember; he's being filtered through a far more modern lens. It's a brutal revenge drama in the style of *Man On Fire* and unmistakably a *Max Payne* adventure, and there are advantages and disadvantages to both approaches.

It certainly means the story beats are quite different, as we join an aged, overweight and alcoholic Payne, lured by old friend Raul Passos into working in São Paulo, Brazil, as a bodyguard to the decadently rich Branco family. Max – voiced by returning glass-gargler James McCaffrey – is forced to rely on his gunplay skills while being pushed towards the edge of reason. As ever, Rockstar is not only playing with storytelling as you bounce in and out of Max's life at various parts of the narrative, but also making its standard wry social commentary. The contrast between the gleaming world of the São Paulo jet set and the poor of the favelas is slowly revealed to only be skin deep, as the ugliness under the surface of both bubbles to the top. The narrative becomes brutally harsh, although old Payne fans may feel Max himself isn't quite personally tortured as much as he has been in the past.

But what really shines is the return of Max Payne's stylish and bloody third-person shooting. It's gratifying how much Rockstar has retained the feel of many Payne staples – like the now-ubiquitous Bullet Time and his classic shoot-dodge – but has also given them a new flavour, mostly thanks to the best use of NaturalMotion's Euphoria tech yet. The physics make combat in *Max Payne 3* simply jaw-dropping. Bullets strike enemies with furious impact, sending blood spiralling into the air and bodies spinning to the ground in spectacular fashion. As you'd expect, combat is all about forward motion; where other third-person shooters would force you into conservatively using cover, *Max Payne 3* demands you dive in with gusto. Bullet Time takes centre-stage, triggered either by shoot-dodging, which sees Max launch himself into the air at enemies in slow-mo, or by clicking the right stick. There is a new cover mechanic but relying on it too much often sees you swarmed. And besides, you feel far cooler diving through the air and blazing away at enemies – especially when you put down the last man in the room, triggering a kill cam that tracks the bullet in agonising slow-mo as it enters their body, and lets you keep pumping bullets into them.



Left: Max Payne 3 is simply no-holds-barred when it comes to violence, and the tech under its hood makes it fairly realistic at times.

AS GOOD AS — BINARY DOMAIN

WORSE THAN — GEARS OF WAR 3

While you feel deadly, *Max Payne 3*'s difficulty level is slightly old-school; its health mechanic, based again on taking pain pills and the amount of damage you take from hits, can quickly put you down. It makes for an interesting risk/reward system as you tackle foes, and makes its polished, stylish moment-by-moment gunplay gripping. Some clever design, especially in the favelas, means that combat works on several levels, and the freedom offered in the heat of battle breaks up any feelings of linearity.

Yet for all its polish, it often feels like there's a bit of an internal struggle going on in *Max Payne 3*, as it attempts to wow with its bombastic combat while telling its gritty story. Sudden shifts from gameplay into cut-scenes occasionally feel imposing, especially in quick succession, and the way Rockstar blocks out encounters makes its checkpoint system occasionally frustrating – you can battle through an entire slew of enemies, only to fall prey to a lone gunman and have to replay a large section of the game.

Worse yet, it can sometimes feel like you're simply moving from one 'kill box' to the next. To be fair, Rockstar has tried to counter this issue by offering players additional pills after multiple deaths, and injecting a great deal of variety into stages with set-pieces based around Bullet Time or particular story moments, and the approach largely works. Seeing Max fall off a scaffold or zipped up a pulley in slo-mo as you intuitively take out an entire group of enemies, for example, is a real thrill, as are the vehicle sections that see you defending yourself against hordes of chasing enemies. One such sequence, which throws Max into the middle of a boat-based chase-and-shoot at the end of the game's first disc, is particularly spectacular, and moments like this very much fit *Max Payne 3*'s modern action movie vibe, and you can't help but get caught up in the immediacy of the moment.

Ultimately, none of the story beats or polish mask the fact that *Max Payne 3* is very much a refinement of an old formula, and if you're looking for something brand new or revelatory it just isn't here. However, what is amazing is how Rockstar has fallen back on its trademark production values and sublime attention to detail to update the franchise in a compelling way. Factor in some impressive multiplayer offerings and it's still head-and-shoulders above most of its trigger-happy ilk. Which perhaps says as much about the state of the genre as it does Rockstar's obvious skill.

MISSING LINK
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

JUST A FLESH WOUND: A new addition is Max's Last Man Standing ability. If you're killed with pills to hand, you recover if you gun down the enemy that killed you – often a saving grace in battle.

FAQs

Q. IS THE BALD LOOK REALLY NECESSARY?
Why Payne shaves his locks becomes clear as you play and makes narrative sense – and you do get to play as 'classic Max.'

Q. DOES MULTIPLAYER REALLY HAVE LEGS?
While not quite a competitive class feature it does add a great deal to the package, especially with its deep progression system.

Q. WHY TWO DISCS?
The graphical polish, sheer amount of detail in levels, multiplayer maps and the length of the campaign – at least ten hours of slo-mo murder – make it hardly surprising.

Left: In a nod to previous instalments, *Max Payne 3* often uses moving video panels with a mobile camera-like filter to replace the still comic book panel cut-scenes of the old games, and it's a very effective trick.



VERDICT 8/10
A SHOOTER AS POLISHED AS MAX'S SHAVED BONCE

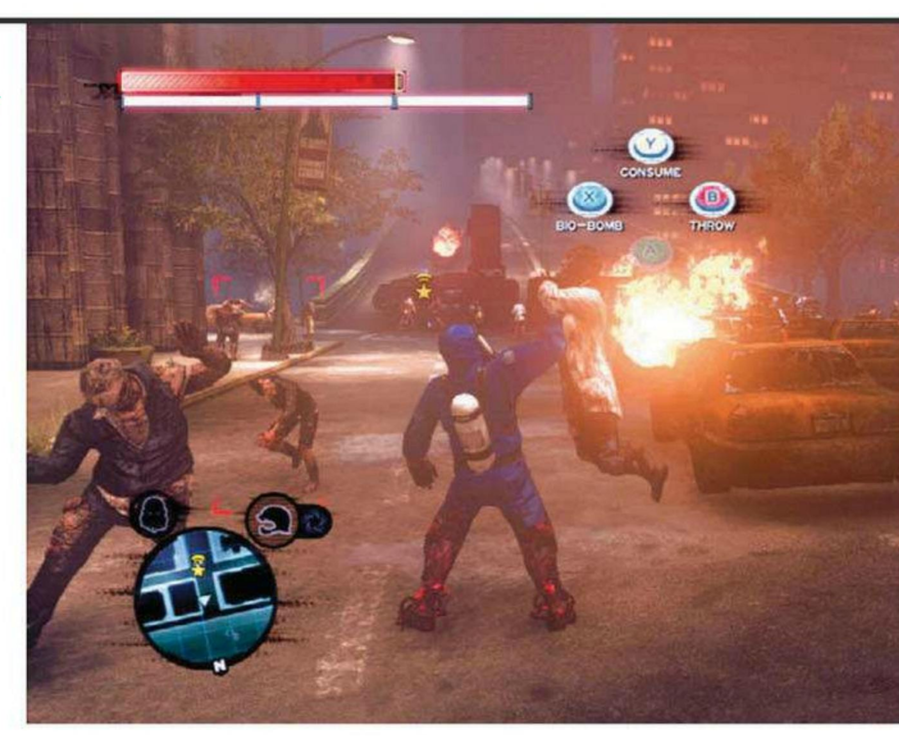
I DON'T WANT VIRTUE TO EXIST ANYWHERE. I WANT EVERYONE TO BE CORRUPT TO THE BONES'

Prototype 2

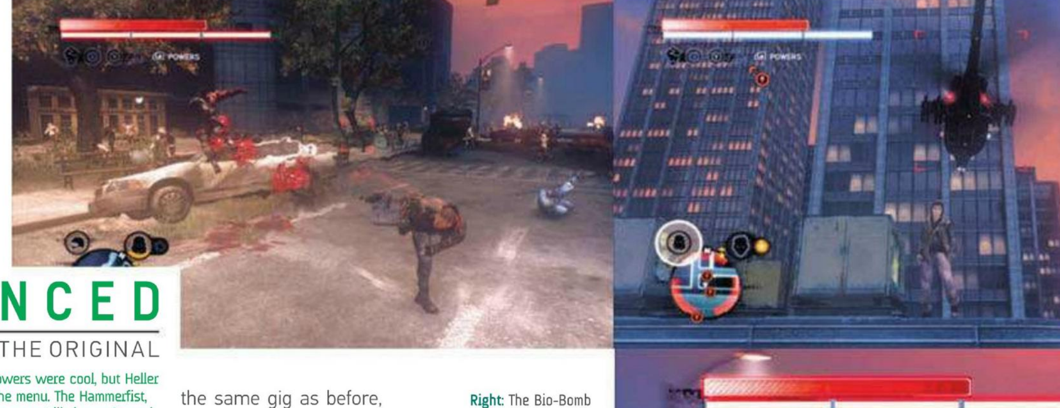
Try as they might, games can never seem to stay out of the headlines for long. It only takes a copy of *Call Of Shooty* to be found in the bedroom of a young murderer and all of a sudden the blood is on the developer's hands in the eyes of the misinformed masses. And while the vast majority of gamers might roll their eyes every time an entire medium is labelled as corruptive, dangerous or downright evil after an atrocity is committed by someone that once 'played a Nintendo', the truth is that some games simply aren't so easy to defend as others. We can shrug away accusations that *World Of Warcraft* could be in some way responsible for driving someone to murder. We can laugh off the idea that the odd Team Deathmatch is training us all to be better terrorists. But when playing *Prototype 2*, any such common sense deflections go out the window, leaving only a saddening window into a wider world. *This* is what the sensationalist headline hunters think every videogame is like – it's indefensibly brash, unnecessarily brutal and utterly brainless, almost to the point of becoming a parody of modern gaming. And while that revelation leaves us feeling a little dirty for enjoying Radical's so-called sequel, we still haven't done a murder because of it. That's got to be worth something.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: Playstation 3
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Activision
DEVELOPER: Radical Entertainment
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Below: It's a little easy to accidentally fall into combat without activating your powers, though the basic punches and kicks are surprisingly powerful.



Simultaneously a no-nonsense game and an utterly nonsensical one, *Prototype 2* picks up a year after the events of the first game, recasting previous antihero Alex Mercer in the role of chief antagonist as the virus claims New York for a second time. Despite the game painting Mercer as the Big Bad Wolf of the piece, reskinned hero James Heller bizarrely makes friends with the former star within the first half hour, only for the two to fall out again soon after in what plays out to be as arbitrary a narrative as a videogame has ever muttered. But *Prototype* was never about ripping yarns or convincing characters, nor should it be expected to be. It's a perfect slice of sandbox silliness, a celebration of gaming before moral decisions and branching dialogue became the norm and, with all due respect to Radical's achievements, a *toy*. A great toy in many ways, sure, but a toy all the same. And in that respect, it's effectively the same gig as before, albeit with a dangerously stereotypical expletive factory in place of the brooding emo frontman of the 2009 original.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

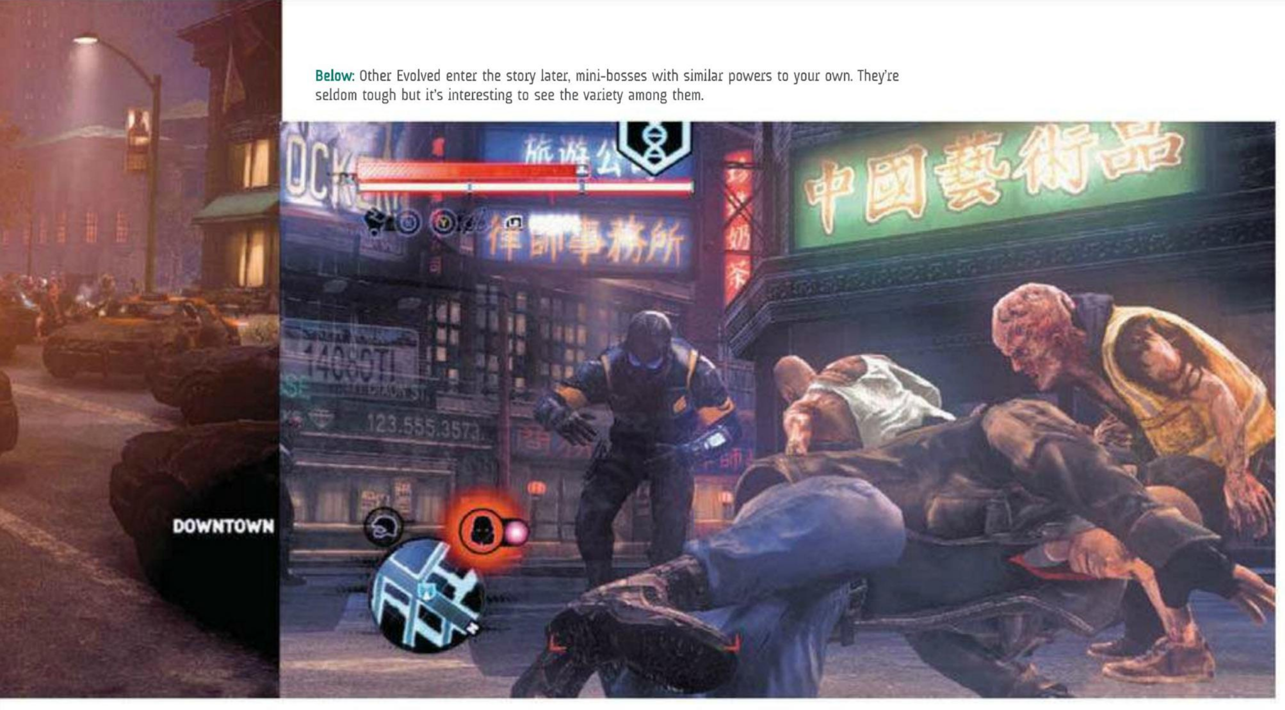
POWERHOUSE: Mercer's powers were cool, but Heller orders one of everything on the menu. The Hammerfist, for instance, is so good that you most likely won't need to use another weapon for the entire game.

But for every bolt Radical tightens, another comes loose. Improved visuals and a far better coherency to the action come at the cost of having to split New York into three separate unconnected areas; rebalanced and additional powers mean that the most satisfying abilities aren't introduced until the game's twilight; a simplified levelling system

Right: The Bio-Bomb ability lets you infect others and weaponise them, tentacles flying everywhere as the poor sap explodes in a shower of blood and body parts. Nice.

AS WITH SAINTS ROW, THE OVER-THE-TOP NATURE OF THE GAME MEANS THAT TECHNICAL BURPS CAN ACTUALLY WORK IN ITS FAVOUR

Below: Other Evolved enter the story later, mini-bosses with similar powers to your own. They're seldom tough but it's interesting to see the variety among them.





FAQs

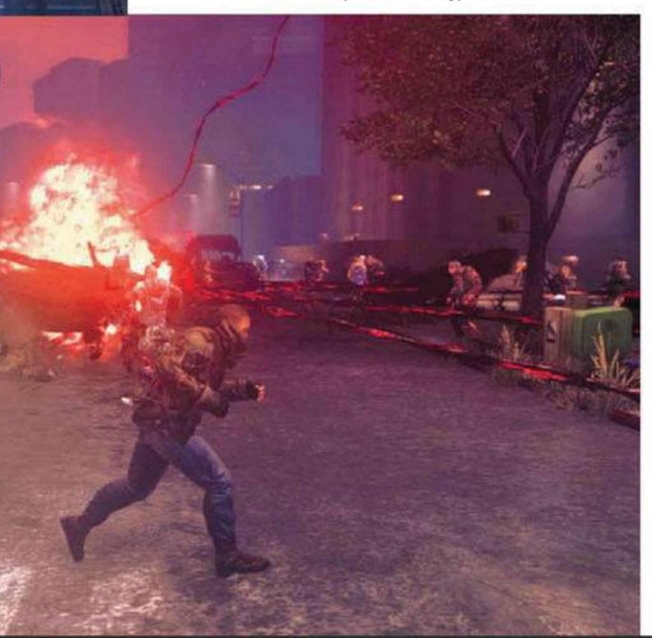
Q. HOW LONG IS IT?
You can blast through the main story in around ten hours, though ignoring side missions will make life rather difficult for you.

Q. HOW SO?
Completing sets of side-missions grants Mutations that improve Heller's abilities, plus there are similar rewards for simply exploring the city.

Q. BIG MAP?
Not especially – rather than being one huge open world, NYZ is split into three decent-sized chunks.

PROJECT NO-DOLLAR

You can't move for online passes and pre-order incentives these days. But as dumb as *Prototype 2* may be on thematic and gameplay levels, its RadNet content portrays the game as a whole different level of stupid. Asking pre-owned buyers for 800 MS Points in order to access certain areas of a game is one thing, but Radical has decided that *Prototype 2*'s RadNet challenges should be locked out to everyone apart from early adopters – a code-only addition to the main game that means if you didn't pick up the game day one, there's an entire menu tab that serves no purpose other than to flip you off for not fighting the game's corner from the outset. It's a real shame too – the Autolog-style potential of the system could have added wonderful longevity to the game had Radical opened the doors to more than just the *Prototype* faithful...



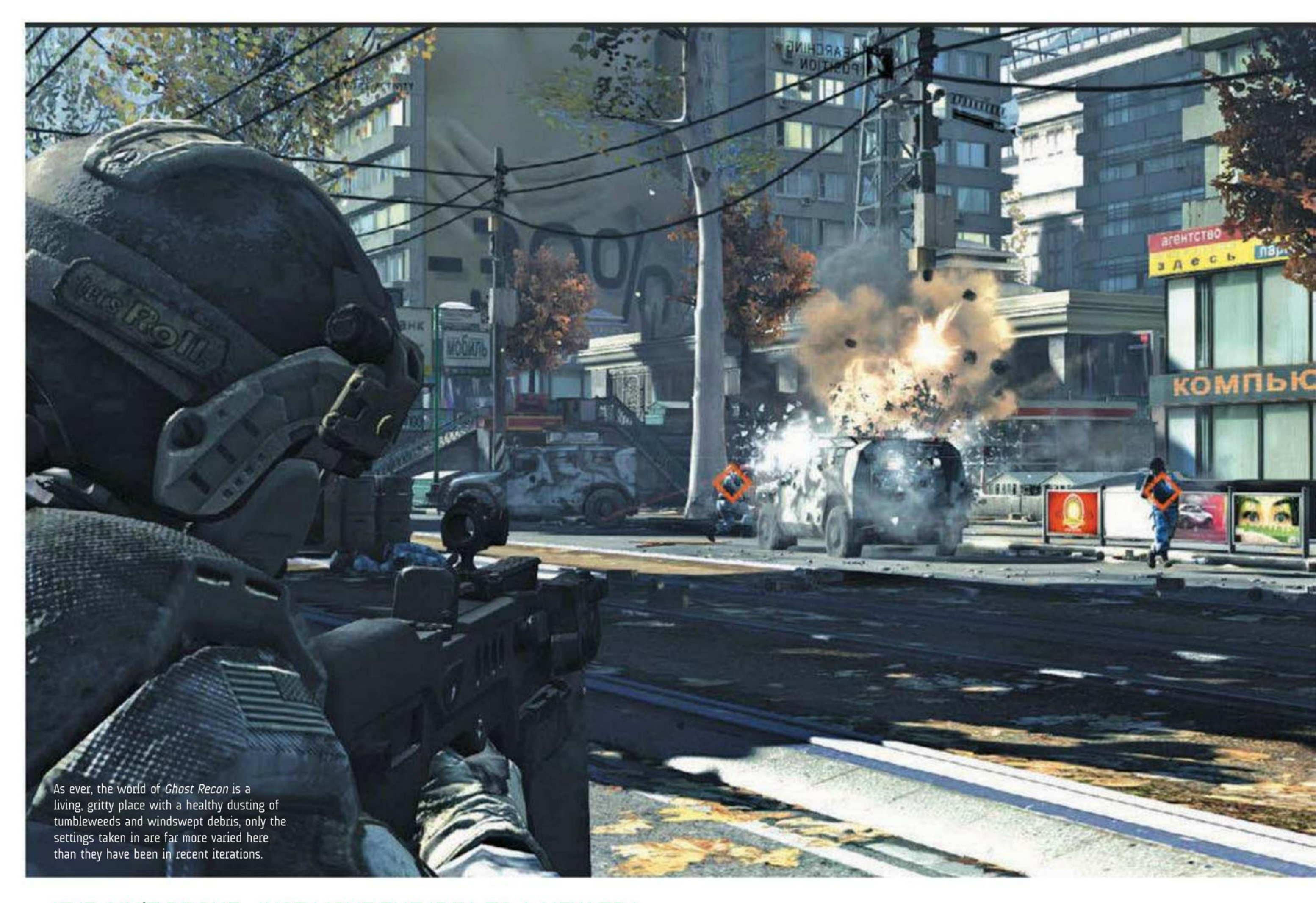
makes the road to ultimate power a straight one indeed, though some of the original's freedom of customisation is sacrificed as a result. The original's uneven difficulty has thankfully been stamped out as well, though once again it's fair to say that every silver lining has a cloud – Normal difficulty is now an absolute cakewalk and, once Heller is all powered up, it's virtually impossible to die at all. It's rare to see player power taken to such an extreme, and in that respect it's certainly an interesting decision on Radical's part, but all it really does on a gameplay level is usher players towards the New Game+ option and the more demanding difficulties.

What it lacks in challenge, though, *Prototype 2* more than makes up in pure, unashamed fun. A lot of its mechanics are daft and overly forgiving but the destruction is enormously satisfying. Much of the action plays out like a messier string of glorious six-star *GTA* chases, explosions engulfing most of Manhattan while grotesque tendrils skewer and sunder the city's mutated residents. There's a wonderful flow to it all as well, clipping issues and a similar technical sloppiness to that which helps make *Saints Row* the loveable open-world clown falling by the wayside when everything comes together – dive from a helicopter, nuke it with its own missile pod and drop to street level to toss a few cars at the remaining choppers and you'll see what we mean. And, as with *Saints Row*, the over-the-top nature of the game means that technical burps can actually work in its favour too, hilarity often forged from glitches and technical mayhem in a way that only a game so clearly refusing to take itself too seriously can get away with.

And there's the clincher. If you like your games to tell an engaging story or to break new ground, *Prototype 2* will probably make you vomit up your own pelvis through sheer outrage. If you're looking for powerful messages or the advancement of a medium, you'll likely be left with little but a sour taste in your mouth and the desire to write a strongly worded letter to Radical expressing your dissatisfaction with the whole experience. But if, on the flipside, you're someone that goes into a game armed with nothing more than a desire to be entertained, you'll struggle to find a more accommodating host than *Prototype 2*. Sure, it's poorly designed in some areas, technically flimsy in others and a by-numbers videogame in many other respects. But it's *fun*. Dirty, stupid, borderline-broken fun perhaps, but fun all the same. Leave your preconceptions, inhibitions and judgments at the door and Radical's latest will not fail to entertain. It's the gaming equivalent of *The Expendables* then, if you will – a celebration of straight-up action that feels compelled to conform to the usual trappings of structure and narrative, even though it'd arguably be a whole lot better if it had the balls to go against the grain and focus exclusively on what it does best.



A TRUE GUILTY PLEASURE



As ever, the world of *Ghost Recon* is a living, gritty place with a healthy dusting of tumbleweeds and windswept debris, only the settings taken in are far more varied here than they have been in recent iterations.

IF IT AIN'T BROKE, JUST MOVE THE IDEA TO A NEW ERA...

Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Future Soldier

There was a time, or so it would seem, when *Ghost Recon* considered taking on the mighty juggernaut that is *Call Of Duty.* When interviewing developers or playing through earlier builds – at E3 2011, for example – it was clear Ubisoft Paris thought a different approach, albeit one somewhat familiar for shooters, was necessary. And then everything changed. *Future Soldier* went quiet, leaving many to speculate that there may be an issue with development or, worse still, that it had been cancelled altogether. For a series that has been going as long as *Ghost Recon*, it was no big surprise that these rumours were nothing more than rabid speculation. With it now finally emerging into the light of day, the path the studio decided to take is clear.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PlayStation 3, PC
ORIGIN: France
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: Ubisoft Paris
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1 (2-16 Online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

Despite being in development for a suspiciously long time, *Ghost Recon: Future Soldier* remains the third-person shooter many have fallen in love with since the series' debut in 2001. It remains a champion of what it sets out to do, namely dropping players into an environment that is essentially a tactical playground and letting them craft a personal plan. Supported by three squadmates – who can also be controlled by humans, should you have the friends – every step and shot requires a certain amount of thought. This isn't the common man's FPS: *Ghost Recon* demands a level of intelligence it's easy to forget once ran rampant throughout the genre. For this reason, *Future Soldier* proves to be immensely satisfying to those bored of the current template. Levels have to be subtly studied and teamwork isn't just a bullet point for the back of the box, made all the more clear thanks to *Future Soldier*'s 'Sync Shot'. Opening up the opportunity to mark up four specific adversaries, which includes one for yourself, it's a case of patience and timing as and when to order the group to pull the trigger. Do it too early, and an entire platoon may be alerted. Wait too long, and there's every chance the element of stealth will be lost. It's in this balance that *Ghost Recon* continues to shine brightest, too.

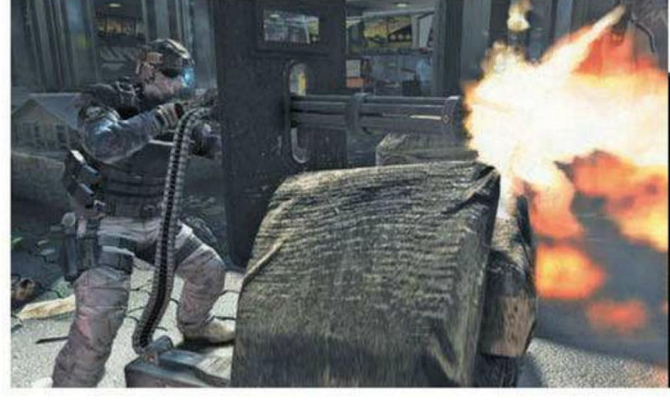
IT MAY NOT CHANGE THE WORLD, BUT IT CERTAINLY DESERVES ITS PLACE WITHIN IT

FAQs

Q. ANY NARRATIVE CROSSOVERS?
There are certainly nods to the other games – the returning Scott Mitchell, for example – but new players won't feel lost.

Q. IS THE GAME'S MULTIPLAYER ITS USP?
Ghost Recon's focus on teamwork means its online offering is unique and engaging, and easily where it'll get its legs.

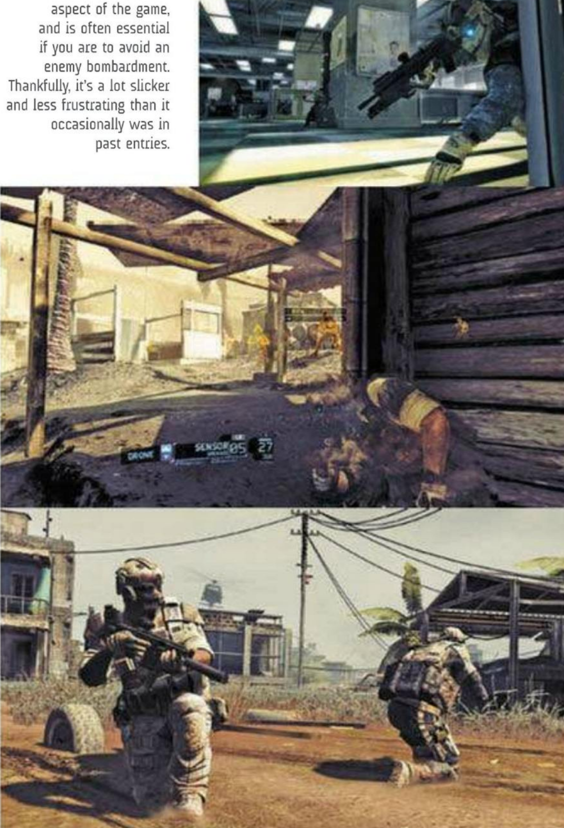
Q. DO WE LEAVE MEXICO?
Unlike *GRAW* and its sequel, *Future Soldier* goes back to how earlier games approached setting and takes you all over the globe.



Below: Although technology is at the forefront of the experience, it's nowhere near as intrusive as the *Future Soldier* subtitle may indicate. Rather than dominate proceedings, it simply adds to them, ensuring this is a *Ghost Recon* game at its heart.



Below: The cover system remains an important aspect of the game, and is often essential if you are to avoid an enemy bombardment. Thankfully, it's a lot slicker and less frustrating than it occasionally was in past entries.



GUNSMITH

Given the reaction Ubisoft received when it wheeled out Gunsmith at last year's E3, it should come as no real surprise that nothing much has changed. While we appreciate the technology put in place – you have to admire a developer for at least trying to embrace Kinect – it just doesn't do anything valuable. It certainly works, but firing a gun by flicking your fingers forward or modifying a weapon by shouting at the TV never progresses to anything more than an interesting gimmick. If Ubisoft had found a way to apply it to the game then Gunsmith could've been something more, but as it stands it's just a rather odd aside.



Ubisoft has been sharp enough to allow for every possible outcome – if a more direct, gun-heavy strategy is needed the game will happily oblige – but meticulously preparing a silent assault and then executing it successfully is surely how *Future Soldier* demands to be experienced. The frantic yet focused nature of attempting such an attack manages to hold up throughout its entirety.

That's not to say the latest in the franchise hasn't stuck to some of the lessons it was potentially experimenting with in its early days. To try and inject a sense of urgency into its pacing, *Ghost Recon* isn't afraid to stick to a more understood aspect of war, slamming a gun in hand and asking nothing more than to use it at will. Such moments are, naturally, more effective and fast, but it's never as simple as laying waste to everything that moves. Civilians have always been a slightly contentious aspect when it comes to gaming, with many developers shying away from including them to avoid any complications that could arise from it. To its credit, Ubisoft tackles such matters head-on, littering certain warzones with residents that have to be avoided at all costs. A few accidental casualties will be written off as acceptable, but misfire to any great degree and the mission will be failed. It creates a fantastic dynamic where it's necessary to boast cat-like reflexes and exceptional aim, all while under terrific pressure. Anything less just won't be good enough.

As positive as this all is, though, it won't have escaped veterans of the series' that this all sounds very familiar. That's because it is. *Future Solider* follows the foundations that made *Ghost Recon* the name it is rigidly, its main twist falling on the vision of what's to come in the military. In many ways, this has worked in Ubisoft's favour, tying in to all the franchise's underlying themes. Optical camouflage, which almost applies a digital representation of the surroundings onto a soldier's uniform, requires a certain amount of thought if used. While it will hide you in the undergrowth, erratic or unpredictable movement will deactivate it, potentially throwing any tactic out the window.

Drones have also seen technological advancement. Instead of the pre-placed machine that moves with a squad, it's now a portable device, ready to be deployed as and when you see fit. Accompanying this are motion sensing grenades, again a convenient tool to throw into an area to see exactly where the enemy lies. To balance the newfound power at your direct disposal, however, is how vulnerable this control makes you. Drones are now far more noticeable to the opposition, made even more hazardous by the fact an eye has to be kept on it at all times. It's the same process for the grenades: go through a batch too soon, and your field of vision will be radically shortened. Death could be but a stone's throw away.

To this end, there may be a few that are slightly confused about why *Ghost Recon: Future Soldier* took so long to arrive, especially when the finished product doesn't feel particularly far removed from what has come before. It's been years since *Advanced Warfighter 2*, though, so getting to return to a model as robust and enjoyable as this is more than welcome. It may not change the world, but it certainly deserves its place within it.

FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

YEARS AHEAD: It will only be a unique selling point until *Black Ops II* arrives later in the year, but the semi-sci-fi tech available in *Future Soldier* certainly gives Ubisoft's game a flavour all its own.

VERDICT 8/10
STILL NOT GIVING UP THE GHOST

ANGRY BIRDS

Starhawk

There's a common misconception surrounding multiplayer shooters. To many, if you're not doing *Call Of Duty* or *Battlefield* numbers, your game is dead in the water. While that's probably the case for the online modes in middle-of-the-road shooters, there's easily a big enough audience for a solid, balanced and well-supported shooter to live a long and happy life.

Just ask *Warhawk*, 2007's often-forgotten multiplayer treasure. While rough around the edges, it gave PS3 owners large-scale, dramatic online warfare long before *Battlefield* got comfy in the console space, and maintained a loyal community for years. And now, some five years later, Lightbox is hoping to repeat that trick with the splendid Starhawk, a space-western reimagining that offers that same grandiose spectacle as *Warhawk*, but crams it with a host of new systems that you'd expect to find in a real-time strategy game.

The setting comes straight out of Joss Whedon's *Firefly*, but gives the world a much-needed dose of colour and life in comparison to *Warhawk*'s cookie-cutter hills and cement bases. You're introduced to its charming, whimsical world through the game's campaign mode, which tells the story of Emmett Graves and his life as a mercenary in the battle for Rift – the glowing blue resource that's fuelled an interstellar war.

Starhawk has pretensions to telling a story both about personal conflict (Emmett eventually has to battle his estranged brother) and politics (battles for resources), but it's all rather clumsily told through cheesy dialogue and animated comic-book scenes, and is best forgotten. The campaign itself, too, is flat and laborious, partly due to the story, but mainly because anyone and everyone knows it's just an elongated tutorial for the multiplayer.

Elongated is the word, though. Each mission gradually introduces another one of *Starhawk*'s marvellous features into the mix, but there's a clear argument to be made that a specific and focused tutorial could have done a much better job. If you're coming to *Starhawk* for single-player, though, you're coming for the wrong reasons, because when you fire up those multiplayer servers (after an update and install or two, naturally), *Starhawk* comes alive.

The best way to describe the action is through the game's premier mode, Capture the Flag. It's 16-on-16, fought across huge maps which can

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 3
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Sony
DEVELOPER: Lightbox
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-32
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



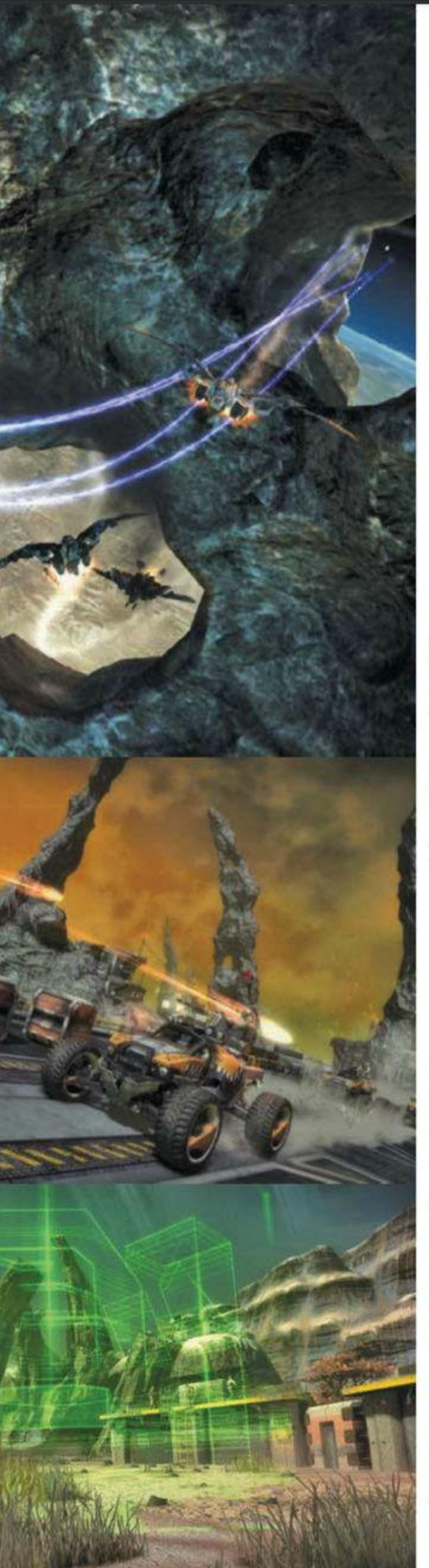
Above: The hawks are a dream to control, fitting somewhere between a jetfighter and an X-Wing. Of course, you can land them on the battlefield and stomp mudholes in the opposition, too, but hang around too long and you'll be blown to bits. **Below:** Like *Starcraft*, tactics will begin to become commonplace as the community becomes more familiar with the maps.



TWIN TOWERS

Hiding beneath *Starhawk*'s basic campaign and extensive multiplayer modes is a perfectly enjoyable co-op mode variant, playable both online and off. Essentially it's a combination of Horde – but isn't it always these days? – and a standard tower defence game, as you hold off waves of enemies by deploying Build And Battle defences, and shooting them with your enormous guns.

While it doesn't have the depth of *Mass Effect 3* or *Gears Of War 3*'s equivalents, *Starhawk*'s co-op does come to life when played on the couch with real people. Actually being able to see your cohort's position and coordinate tactical resource management is surprisingly compelling. As is nicking their *Starhawk* and flying off in it, laughing.





be tackled as infantry, ground vehicles or the titular Starhawks, all seamlessly integrating with one another and showing off some of the best scaling tricks since the original *Katamari Damacy*.

So far, so *Warhawk*, then, but where *Starhawk* really distances itself from its spiritual predecessor is in the new Build And Battle system. As you collect Rift from nearby towers or by killing enemies, you can build huge battlements in real time by simply hoisting up a radial menu, selecting your contraption of choice and dumping it straight onto the field.

It's a fairly daunting system at first, especially when your inaugural creation crashes out of the sky in front of you and scares the living daylights out of you, but quickly it all starts to fall into place and make more sense. You can build supply bunkers filled with rocket launchers; sniper towers; jetbike stations; tank garages; even walls. It makes Capture the Flag a completely dynamic and unpredictable experience, as there are 32 base builders on the map creating the kind of defences you'll never see twice.

WORLDWIDE
TAKING GAMING ONLINE

P$N: As is to be expected, taking *Starhawk* online requires a single-use pass code, or a £7.99 down payment. In a world where free-to-play online shooters grow daily, this feels positively archaic.

While the resource management isn't as intense as a traditional RTS, there's a lot of tactical pondering nonetheless. For example, knowing that charging towards a well-barricaded enemy will only end in you dying and them collecting more Rift means you have to work well with your team and ensure that raids are carefully considered. With this being an action game, though, the focus is still firmly on the killing and destruction of all and sundry. A well-trained 'hawk pilot can undo even the tightest defensive system through accurate offense and clever use of flares, so the battlefield is constantly shifting and mutating. There's mercifully very little barrier to entry, too. Unlike *Battlefield 3*, flying in *Starhawk* is extremely simple – it's the game's high point and Lightbox clearly wants everyone to experience and enjoy it.

Of course, it helps that it's a lovely game to look at, especially when 32 players are zipping across the turf. The bold colour palette and redneck-ramshackle architecture work beautifully together, like *Rage* through a *Timesplitters* lens, and there's a glossy PS3 sheen coating the whole thing.

FAQs

Q. HOW MANY PLAYERS ONLINE?
32, which keeps things nicely balanced and smooth.

Q. HOW LONG'S THE CAMPAIGN?
No longer than five or six hours, but it's pretty flat.

Q. DO I NEED TO HAVE PLAYED *WARHAWK*?
Absolutely not. This is extremely easy to get into and understand.

IF YOU'RE COMING TO STARHAWK FOR SINGLE-PLAYER, YOU'RE COMING FOR THE WRONG REASONS



Above: Every time you respawn, you hurtle towards ground in a steerable pod. At first this seems like a hollow gimmick, but quickly you learn that you can squash enemies and even crush opposing 'hawks with a good sense of direction. It's just one more clever trick up *Starhawk*'s dust-covered sleeve.

Perhaps most importantly, though, *Starhawk* has rock-solid fundamentals backing up its bold ideas. The shooting is tight and accurate, blending a *COD*-style snap aim to speedy movement and chunky weapons. Ground vehicles take minutes to get to grips with and are universally entertaining to zip around in, and of course the flying is silky-smooth and extremely simple to understand. It might not quite hit the heady heights of *Battlefield 3*'s unscripted drama and unmitigated destruction, but when you're hurtling back to base with the flag and two 'hawks firing lasers past your ears… well, it's not far off.

Starhawk's campaign is throwaway, really, and the kinetic, expansive combat would slot in perfectly next to the likes of *Tribes Ascend* and *Firefall* as a free-to-play online title. As a full-priced effort, though, it's crucial to know what you're getting yourself into. This is a true multiplayer experience, which despite its accessibility, demands commitment and communication to enjoy to its fullest. It's also a game, though, that deserves to be loved.

VERDICT 8/10
PITCH-PERFECT MULTIPLAYER WARFARE

THIS CLUB IS CLOSED FOR SINGLE MEMBERS

Mario Tennis Open

DETAILS
FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Camelot
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



Below: You can customise your character with racquets, wristbands, trainers and shirts with their own stats, but there's not enough in each category to really draw you in.

***Mario Tennis Open* is not a game for the solo player, nor one that does do a good job of hiding its glaring weakness.** The options available are slim – you can take part in a series of tournaments that only differ in name, as well as four minigames, and unlock items to customise your in-game Mii. The latter might seem like that will provide drip-feed addiction, but the range of items is too limited to tempt you away from a desperate search around the menus for further game modes.

Actually playing *Mario Tennis Open* does little to disprove the theory that this wasn't designed with single-player in mind. Power-ups are regularly dished out at the spot on the court where you'll hit returns but unlike the spectacle of GameCube's *Mario Power Tennis*, cinematics are traded for the gentle fizz of special effects. It helps with the back-and-forth flow of each match, but also eats into the personality of the characters, leaving little to distinguish between them besides their avatar.

There are also some strange design decisions in evidence here. The gyrosensor sensibly disables 3D and places the camera behind you, allowing you to tilt the 3DS to aim each shot. Yet it also automatically moves your character into optimum positions for returns, making it far too easy to play. It's only by pinging back to a lofted view of the entire court that movement is handed back, allowing challenge to bleed back into matches.



Tedious debates about the merits of the 3DS and what the extra dimension has brought to gaming have drowned out a bigger, more important shift in Nintendo's thinking – online. That seems to be reflected in the threadbare single-player options, which show a rare confidence from Nintendo in online play, and that's justified with how good multiplayer is here.

Power shots frequently appear, which makes matches a back-and-forth tussle that feels more personal when another player is controlling your opponent rather than lines of code. It also highlights the true purpose of power shots, which is to leave your opponent second-guessing as to whether you'll hit them or not. You can see which power-up will appear for your opponent and move into where the power-up will hit the ball, but your opponent has the option to ignore it entirely and hit another shot, capitalising on your incorrect guess. It's a brilliant bit of gaming psychology that's woefully (and understandably) underplayed in single-player.

The minigames also feel like they're designed with more than one player in mind, the standouts being hitting the ball against a screen slowly scrolling through *Super Mario Bros.* (warp pipes and all) and Ring Shot, a race to a set points total where players juggle between the need to hit winners and smash returns through floating rings for extra points.

There will rightfully be criticism for the slender single-player modes here, but the true worth of *Mario Tennis Open* is in multiplayer, both as the game's biggest strength and a quiet indicator of Nintendo's online handheld revolution.

VERDICT 6/10
AWFUL FOR LONE PLAYERS, GREAT FUN FOR TWO OR MORE





Above: There isn't a lot to distinguish between the characters. The likes of Donkey Kong are noticeably slower and hit shots harder, but on the court the differences between characters become negligible.

SHUFFLING TOWARDS BRILLIANCE

The Walking Dead – Chapter One: A New Day

DETAILS

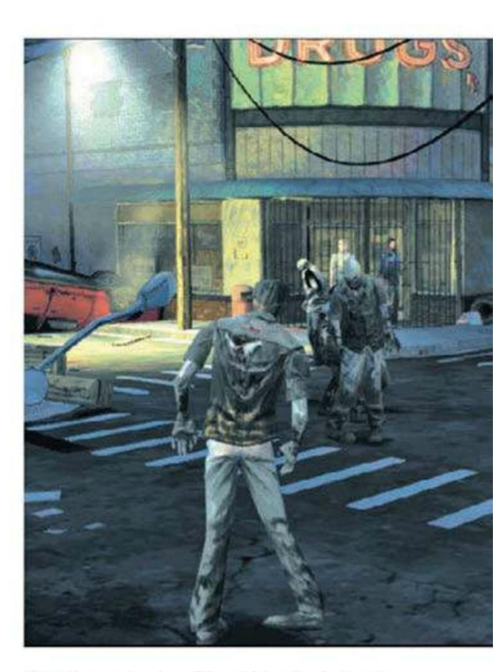
FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Mac, PlayStation 3
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Telltale Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: 400 Microsoft Points
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

We'll admit, as we booted up Telltale's *Walking Dead* tie-in for the first time, we were filled with tension, fear and perhaps even a sense of dread. But it wasn't because of the zombies. Oh no; it was because of the dinosaurs. After an extended period of consistently achieving excellence with its output, the leading light in adventure games completely jumped the T-Rex with its recent *Jurassic Park* travesty, and we were beginning to worry that the team had misplaced its usually dependable ability to recapture lightning on cue.

We were fools to lose faith. *A New Day* is easily one of the strongest efforts the Telltale team has delivered so far, and will stand as a real eye-opener for anyone who believes the point-and-click genre has nowhere left to go.

Beginning handcuffed in the back of a cop car – as all hell speeds past you in the opposite direction, straight towards a citywide zombie holocaust – players take on the role of Lee Everett, a man with a heavy heart who is on his way to prison after supposedly murdering a senator. It's a subdued start, with little for the player to do except look around from a fixed back-seat position and talk to the cop behind the wheel, but it perfectly establishes both the overall tone of the game and Telltale's gameplay focus throughout this and the ensuing four episodes.

As the cop digs into Lee's life, so the player is free to give up as much information as they wish to – to play the conversation as cagey as possible, or to be open and honest about the character's history – and it's a level of freedom that carries through every interaction undertaken in the game. Even simple chats with strangers are deeply rooted in character, with everyone you meet reacting to each dialogue branch and



Above: Sharp-eyed readers will be quick to notice the 'Everett's Prescriptions' signage. It's all part of Telltale's grand plan to drown its lead character in pathos.

Below: One thing the *Walking Dead* TV show struggles with is drip-feeding the zombie terror while maintaining interest in the domestic lives of the survivors. *A New Day* gets the balance just right.

FURTHER READING: JURASSIC PARK: THE GAME | REVIEW | ISSUE 117 | PAGE 116

FAQs

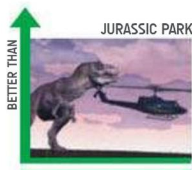
Q. AS GOOD AS THE SHOW?
It's better in many ways, particularly in the strength of its characterisation and dialogue.

Q. IS IT WORTH THE CASH?
A full season on XBLA will cost 2,000 MS Points. Season passes on PC, Mac and PS3 run between £15 and £20. So yes.

Q. WHAT ABOUT iOS?
It's been delayed until some time in the summer.

BETTER THAN

JURASSIC PARK





HEAVY RAIN

WORSE THAN

WILL STAND AS A REAL EYE-OPENER FOR ANYONE WHO BELIEVES THE POINT-AND-CLICK GENRE HAS NOWHERE LEFT TO GO

continually re-evaluating their opinion of Everett. It leads to an unusual level of human interest and pathos, and instils a desire to remain true to the outward character of Everett as defined by you, rather than judge each conversation in isolation. With the player's previous experience governing every decision made, *The Walking Dead* doesn't need to pander to its audience or lose itself in self-absorption in the way that caused *Heavy Rain* to elicit laughs rather than tears from a portion of its audience.

And, after Everett befriends orphaned girl Clementine and the two set off to find sanctuary, meeting new survivors at every step of their journey, so these decisions become more important and all-encompassing, to the extent that choices relating to the fate of others far outweigh the importance of simply staying alive. When the shit hits the fan, and a group of marauding zombies breaks through the group's picket-fence safety, choosing who to save in the spur of the moment has consequences either way, leading to character deaths or wildly varying outcomes that will almost certainly cause ripples in future instalments.

Moments such as these, which punctuate the quiet, sombre silence of *The Walking Dead* with scenes of sudden, brutal violence, carry a genuine weight and power to them, not just because of the game's strength of character but also due to Telltale's game design decisions. The developer innovates with first-person sections that see Everett struggling to load a shotgun with shaking hands or peeking over a wall to find a way through a zombie-heavy parking lot, while the few puzzles that are included manage to bridge the gap between mechanical point-and-click solution-wrangling and actions that stem directly from the human needs of the survivors.

Only a few technical issues hold back the proceedings; some sound glitches mean lines of dialogue get stepped on or are delivered with jarringly poor timing, while some signposting and trigger annoyances lead to a couple of possible point-and-click dead ends about halfway through the two-hour episode. However, it's easy to forgive a game as involving as this, while the Robert Kirkman-faithful art style, worthy voice-acting and extremely expressive cast of characters bring the game's world to life in a way that sidesteps the uncanny valley issues that regularly plague pretty much any attempt to meld videogame characters with honest-to-goodness human emotion.

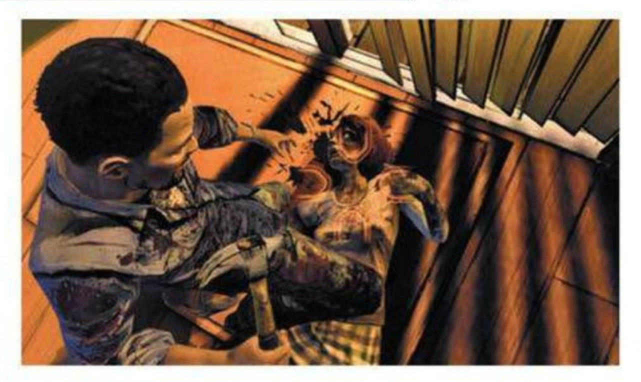
A return to form with a vengeance, then, Telltale hasn't just refound its mojo here; it has created an affecting, innovative and tension-filled adventure that finds new ways to blend the point-and-click and interactive movie experience genres, and more than does justice to its source material in the process. Worshippers at the altar of Sam, Max or Strongbad might be turned off by its methodical, languid pace, relatively small number of puzzles and mostly humourless tone, but a season pass is recommended to anyone who enjoys seeing the adventure game's boundaries pushed, or has even a passing interest in new ways of delivering narrative.

What Telltale has created here is a narratively-driven game that's as much about people as events, as much about inaction as it is putting walkers out of their misery, and as much about what cannot be changed as the countless choices the player is forced to make. If the developer can now make good on the game's initial promise, and deliver a truly branching narrative that adapts to the decisions taken throughout each episode – something, lest we forget, that not even the mighty BioWare could carry through the *Mass Effect* trilogy with any conviction – then *The Walking Dead* could be remembered as a genuine classic of the genre.

SYNTHESIS

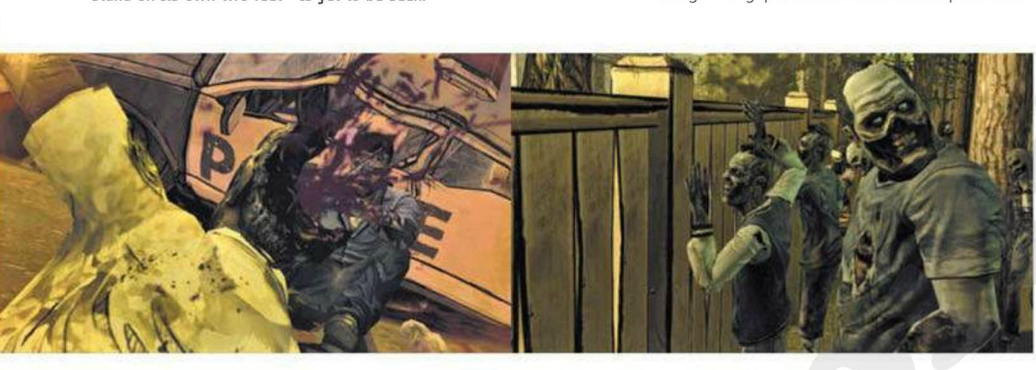
BRINGING GENRES TOGETHER

DEAD EYES: First-person action mixes with third-person exploration, strengthening character focus.
THEY'RE HERE: Quiet conversation breaks into violent, frantic attempts to stay alive against all odds.



ZOMBIE GAIDEN

The Walking Dead manages to avoid questions of where it sits in the comic/TV show canon, by offering a side-story that takes in the events of the comic (and its slightly different TV counterpart) from a parallel perspective. Fan service is paid with cameo appearances from Glenn and farm-owner Herschel, but in truth they don't amount to much, and feel the most stifling areas of the game by design, simply because the fate of any familiar characters is already set in stone, and therefore lacking in the dread and tension so prevalent elsewhere. Whether players can expect more guest appearances throughout subsequent episodes – or if Telltale will allow its story to stand on its own two feet – is yet to be seen.





VERDICT 8/10

A POINT-AND-CLICK WITH BRAINS AND HEART

THE BLAND THAT TIME FORGOT

Bloodforge

Sorry Climax – nobody's falling for this. You can change the ancient mythology to 'Celtic' instead of Greek, and you can even go on record in a behind-the-scenes video released on Xbox Live saying your character 'Crom' is nothing like the vaguely-similar-sounding Kratos. You can do all that, and people will still say your snazzy-looking action-slasher is a *God Of War*-alike. But when you foul up the all-important gameplay, that's when you just make people angry, and that's when the negative comparisons begin. So here's one of them.

Pilot the angry, skull-helmeted husband of an accidentally murdered wife ('O, ye Gods and thy trickery', et cetera) around a bunch of identically high-contrast monochromatic environments, killing stuff and 'collecting' blood to fuel your Xbox Live leaderboard. Bar the occasional choice of fork in the road – which interestingly can cause you to completely miss out largely essential weapon pickups – there's no further side-setting, apart from the odd bland, shouted cut-scene. None of *God Of War*'s spectacle of scale or set-pieces. Therefore it falls to the combat itself, as in *Devil May Cry* and its friends, to be of crowning importance. Pity, then, that it veers eccentrically between average and downright terrible.

Sure, there's a basic combo system in place, and each comes with a different score value when executed, and the higher the score, the more your attacks are boosted by filling a 'rage' bar for powered up fighting. Unfortunately, *Bloodforge* lacks a lock-on facility, any form of blocking and, critically, a counter system, meaning very early in the game the prospect of a boisterous, combo-laden melee encounter is made an impossibility. Shouting bundle of rage Crom has no choice but to use LT's quick roll move to deftly avoid each and every hit about his person, quickly turning almost every encounter into a mess of slash, evade, slash, evade. Climax's hopelessly troubled camera and overblown *300*-esque saturation finish the job, making a session of *Bloodforge* little more than a motion sickness-inducing wash of black and red smears, as even the weakest minibioss must be picked apart in five minute-long hit-and-run missions. Any attempt to get involved in a fight with more than two opponents quickly ends in death, Crom's finite health bar never quite topped up enough due to a worryingly slim outlay of healing items.

But it's not enough to say that *Bloodforge* is 'too difficult'. It's taxing, sure, but even a steep difficulty curve can be overcome if there's an adequate combat system and even the slightest curiosity on the part of the player as to what happens next. This failure is Climax's biggest crime. Every level looks the same, and nearly every enemy fights the same. Do you want to go to a grey-tinted swamp, a tar-slicked underworld or a barren, two-tone desert? Would you like to fight men with claws, swords or axes? If these are the only questions you could ever want answered, then play *Bloodforge*, but do please also close the door after you, lest Climax decides to make more of them.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Microsoft
DEVELOPER: Climax Studios
PRICE: 1,200 Microsoft Points
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Below: Most of the time, due to lack of lock-on or blocking, keeping a whole load of distance between Crom and enemies is the only way to stay alive and fighting.



MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

GOLDEN ASS: There's a fair catalogue of rubbish things which should be different, but the crowning glory is putting important magic spells in what's basically a hidden submenu on RB. Idiotic.

BETTER THAN



GOLDEN AXE: BEAST RIDER

WORSE THAN



GOD OF WAR II



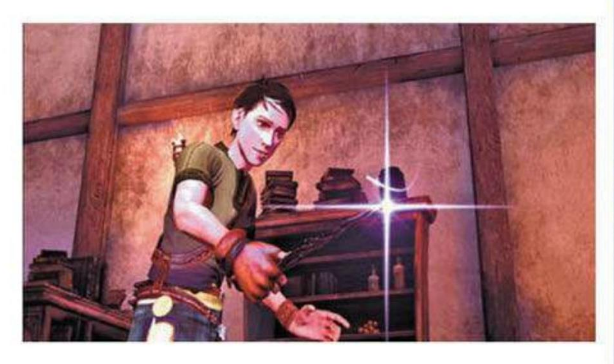
VERDICT 3/10

IRON-AGE GAMEPLAY IN A DIGITAL WORLD



Above: The game's visuals, though confusingly dark in action, are strikingly good-looking 'for a download game' in cut-scenes. Pity nearly every character wears an animation-saving mask, though.







Above: The 'RPG' portion of the game boils down to combining different ingredients to form new spells or upgrade old ones. While it's by no means an exhaustively comprehensive system, it does make for a surprisingly enjoyable cauldron mini-game.

SOLID SNAPE

Sorcery

In much the same way that *Kinect Star Wars* purported to fulfil a lifetime of childhood fantasies, *Sorcery* touts a wickedly geek-gratifying conceit at its core: dust off the musty robe and grow a beard because you're a wizard now. Thanks to PlayStation Move (finally put to inventive use) you have a magic wand thrust into your palm, capable of casting a series of arcane spells (mostly destructive) with a flick of the wrist and nary a sign of a speccy schoolboy in sight.

At its best, the opening moments of *Sorcery* are beguiling; the vibrant landscape, evoking *Fable*'s Albion, is wondrously enchanting, and the initial introduction to your wand is similarly charming – the two initial spells are intuitive and a quick wave of the Move controller navigates spells to their designated targets with impressive accuracy. It's a solid framework, but it's all squandered promptly as *Sorcery* finds itself losing traction on its central idea.

Developer The Workshop struggles to differentiate which motion-controlled gestures contribute to player enjoyment and which are just a mere hindrance – opening chests and piecing together debris burdens the player, rather than working as an organic interaction with the scenery. By contrast, combat is impressively diverse. Spells conjure powerful whirlwinds, wide-spreading flames and neutralising icicles, each possessing the potential to do mass damage when used inventively – summon a tornado, fill it with flames and then fire bolts into the cyclone and watch the carnage unfold. But even when spells are combined there's a lack of punch.

It's here that *Sorcery* suffers most. As the act of casting any ambitious spell takes far too long considering the payoff, players will find themselves relying on the same few standard attacks just to cut through the droves of enemies. Wrist ache ensues as the same repetitive motions will suffice to blast through the story, and the only time any combination of spells is needed is during heated boss battles – during which muddled gestures and time pressures impede the flow of combat.

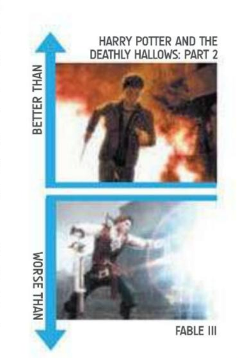
It's an encumbrance that weighs down the rest of the game, turning what could have been a rich and rewarding fantasy adventure into a middle-of-the-road third-person shooter. Further burdening the core conceit is the dreadful story, which fails to sustain any player attention with an ineffective mix of tensionless storybook cut-scenes and an unbearably self-assured protagonist.

Ultimately, *Sorcery*'s use of PlayStation Move to mimic the grace and poise of a magic wand is equal parts its greatest strength and its crippling weakness – suggesting that there's no room for intuitive, deep gameplay within Sony's motion controller. It's one of those all-too-common instances of an ingenious idea flawed in its execution, and begs the question: what can Sony conjure up next for Move?

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 3
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Sony
DEVELOPER: The Workshop, Santa Monica Studio
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: HARRY POTTER AND THE DEATHLY HALLOWS: PART 2



WORSE THAN: FABLE III

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

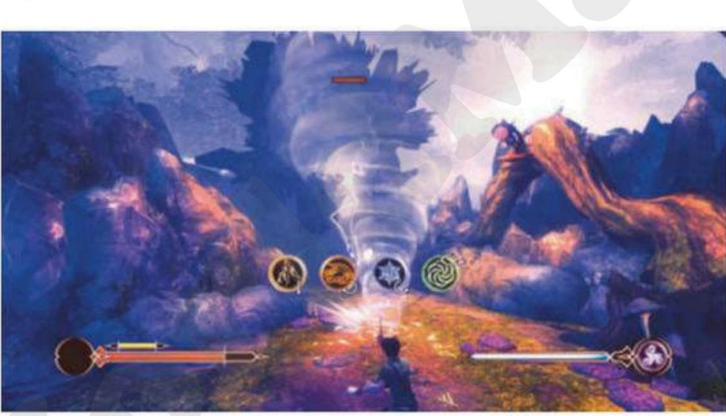
INTEREST: *Sorcery* would benefit from a story overhaul to make the experience more involving, not to mention replacing the cocksure protagonist with a character you'd want to spend eight hours with.



VERDICT 5/10
HARDLY SPELLBINDING

Below: While there's a wide variety of spells to cast, there's no clear indication of exact gestures to cast specific spells. Raising a cyclone can be a frustrating exercise in flailing, which we can't imagine The Workshop was aiming for.





SHOOT FROM THE HIP

Resistance: Burning Skies

While it has never received the same level of commercial recognition, *Resistance* is Sony's answer to Microsoft's ubiquitous first-party *Halo* franchise, and arguably is a much stronger series at its core. While Microsoft seems content to keep Master Chief in staid surroundings, *Resistance* has proven itself to date as nothing if not a progressive and iterative first-person shooter series, consistently upping the ante as it moved towards its pinnacle in last year's third chapter.

It therefore makes sense that Sony would want to push forward its most accomplished shooter onto the PS Vita – the first FPS to demonstrate the capabilities of the handheld's snazzy dual analogue controls, along with all those other lavish bells and whistles grafted to every inconvenient inch of the device.

And for the most part it works. The PS Vita is more than adequate when it comes down to offering an intuitive grip on first-person gunplay, enabling accuracy and control that's just shy of equalling its console counterpart. Nevertheless, the Vita being the multifaceted everything-and-the-kitchen-sink device that it is, developer Nihilistic Software has decided to shoehorn unnecessary (but not wholly unexpected) gestures into gameplay to such an extreme that it often detracts from the otherwise accomplished FPS mechanics.

As inconsequential as it sounds, opening doors is a total nuisance. If you tap just outside of the highlighted zone or find yourself shy of the trigger area then you're likely to unload an explosive shell from your secondary ammunition. It's the result of the clunky and inconsiderate implementation of the touch screen; exactly how it expects players to use two fingers to swipe in opposite directions to form a shield while maintaining control of the player character is baffling – a less frustrating solution would be to map gestures to the rear touchpad, but this feature of the console has been outright ignored by the developer. Which is a shame, because with some careful consideration to the overall interplay between design elements, *Resistance: Burning Skies* could have been more than just a decent first-person shooter.

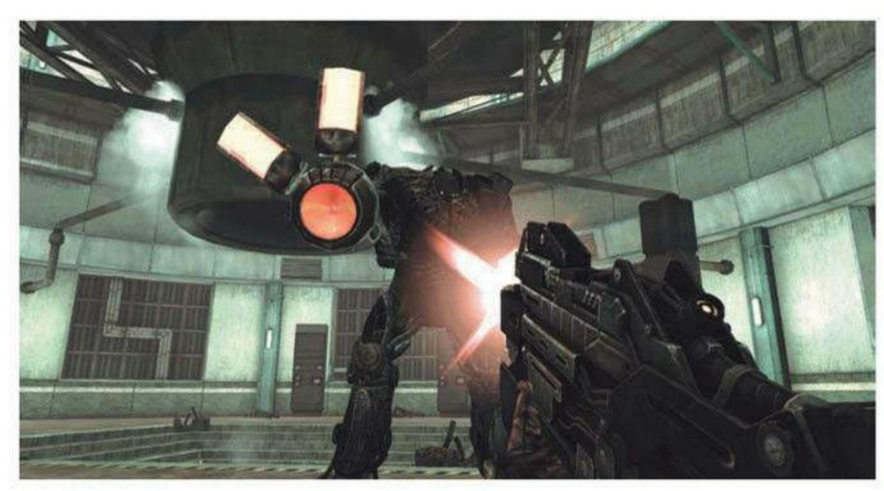
Wisely, it doesn't try to compete with the main entries in the series to date. It may be founded on contemporary first-person tropes but *Resistance: Burning Skies* feels more akin to something from the PC in the late Nineties (which as far as backhanded compliments go is pretty chafing). Where this benefits *Burning Skies* is in the intense focus on hefty guns, brawny enemies and pacing, all of which was present in the series before, but here both aesthetically and in tone owes more to *Half-Life* than *Resistance 3*.

But where this works against the portable spin-off is in scope – it feels distinctly limited. And while it is stuffed with exciting ideas, it can't hide the fact it is the least ambitious entry to date. Most of the game is confined to grimy corridors of some scientific facility, filled with the same enemies, so any excuse to get out in the open feels positively liberating as you head into

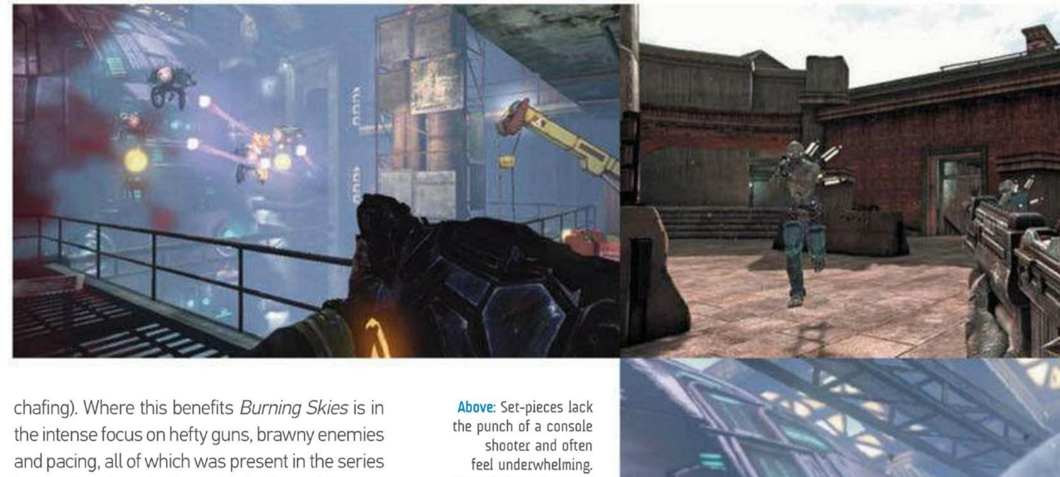
DETAILS

FORMAT: PS Vita
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Sony
DEVELOPER: Nihilistic Software
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-8
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

Right: The cover system is poorly implemented and the game expects players to rely heavily on it. It doesn't help that the player character has extraordinarily low HP, which makes jumping from cover-to-cover near impossible.



Above: This mini-boss makes multiple appearances throughout the single-player campaign. The lack of major bosses is disappointing, especially considering that the series is so well known for them.

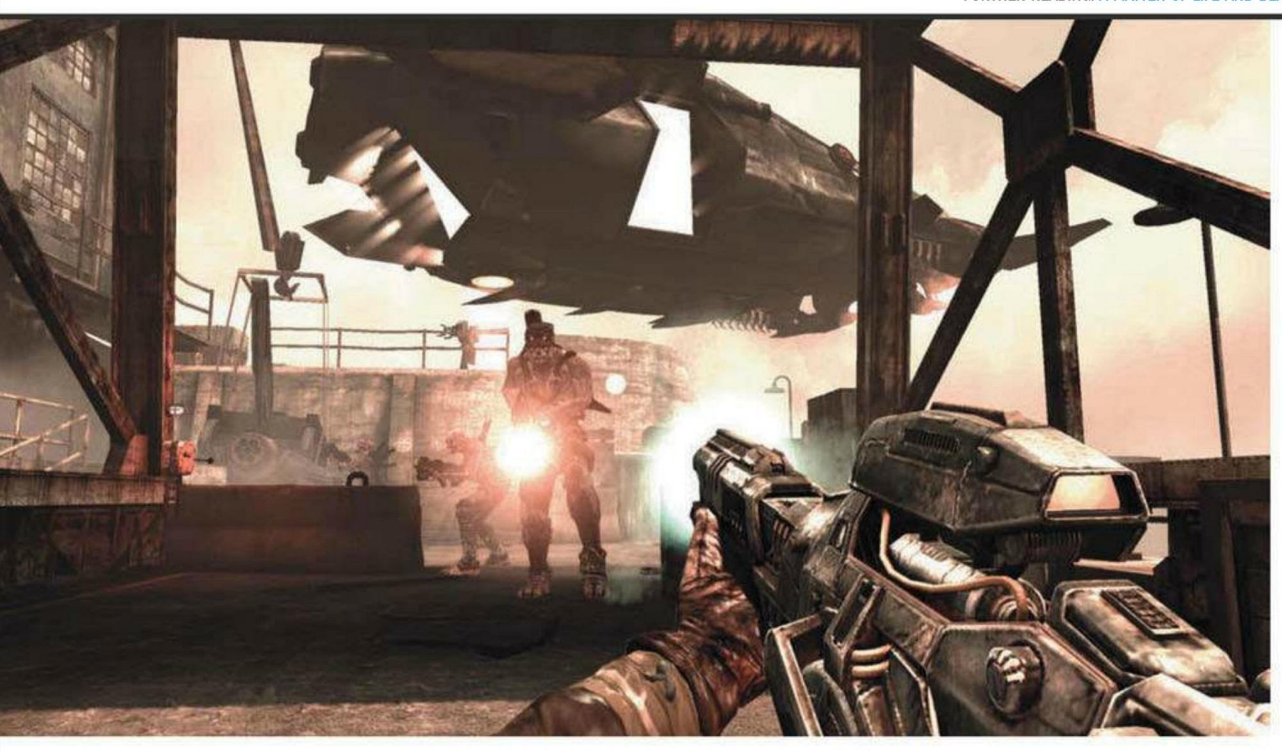


Above: Set-pieces lack the punch of a console shooter and often feel underwhelming. Nevertheless, there are some interesting ideas displayed throughout and levels have interesting dynamics.

Right: There are a lot of explosions in the game. None of them look particularly great.

BURNING SKIES BOTH AESTHETICALLY AND IN TONE OWES MORE TO HALF-LIFE THAN RESISTANCE 3

FURTHER READING: A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH | FEATURE | ISSUE 119 | PAGE 22





FAQs

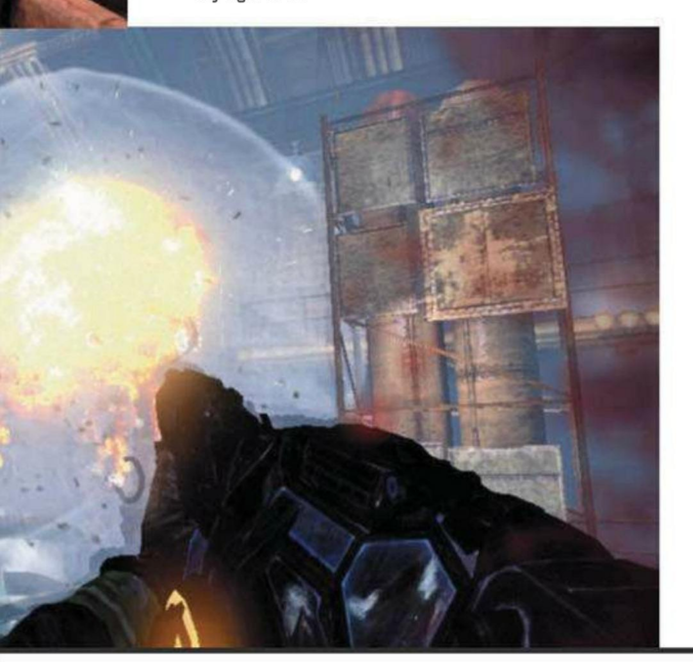
Q. WHO'S THE PROTAGONIST?
Tom Riley, an incredibly bland everyman, looking for his family among the obliteration of society.

Q. ARE THE GUNS FUN?
Definitely. While most are old favourites, there's plenty of interesting weaponry to keep everyone interested.

Q. GIANT ALIENS?
Not as many as you'd think. While brutish mini-bosses are in abundance, only a couple of goliaths make an appearance.

TOUCH UP

An intriguing feature in both gameplay terms and how it implements the touchscreen intuitively into the design is *Burning Skies*' upgrade system. Players will find glowing blue cubes scattered around each level, which unlock one weapon upgrade (with each of the game's firearms able to have two active at any one time; one for primary and one for secondary fire). It evenly assigns powers across each of the game's weapons, encouraging players to constantly switch-up and experiment with the arsenal during skirmishes. You can also select which upgrade you want to activate by spinning the cube with your finger – a neat little design feature that is more satisfying than it has any right to be.



the final stretch of the game's seven-or-so-hour single-player campaign.

For the majority of the time, though, the game is exceptionally paced. You're never lingering too long in one location, always springing to the next objective, or hurried urgently along as the invasion slowly cripples the unsuspecting American pie Fifties town. The story isn't interesting in the slightest (small-town fireman searching for family, kills aliens and uncovers government secret) but it doesn't impede the flow of gameplay either (a healthy choice both for a portable title and a first-person shooter). Instead, it maintains this pace by introducing new weapons and upgrades, both staggered exquisitely, becoming available to the player at precisely the right moment to sustain interest and drive momentum.

There are only eight firearms in the game, which, admittedly, doesn't sound hugely inspiring. And while Nihilistic has cribbed the majority of these weapons from previous instalments, there's enough diversity in terms of power and functionality to stomp out any strong urge to preference one over another. Secondary fire functions in much the same barmy way as players have come to expect in the series thus far; explosive-tipped arrows, remote-control drones and remote-detonated mines are just a few of the explosive-skewed deadly ammunition choices *Burning Skies* packs.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

FACE LIFT: Even by handheld standards the visuals are a little sub-par, and an area where a little more care would have gone a long way to making *Burning Skies* stand out on the system.

Unfortunately, *Burning Skies* runs out of ideas as it reaches the final few chapters. It not only becomes increasingly repetitive as it nears the climax but also puts a significant strain on players' patience as Nihilistic injects enemies with a higher HP and more powerful weapons, rather than finding a more engaging way to challenge players. It's a jarring difficulty spike that almost undermines everything the game has so far accomplished as it impressively leaps from one set-piece to the next.

There's also a problem with visibility. For a game designed on a portable console, several segments of the game (including the majority of the opening mission) are set in dark corridors, making it almost impossible to see where you are going unless you happen to be playing in pitch-black surroundings. What is otherwise an exciting, action-packed first-person shooter that showcases the hardware's potential is let down all too often by similar minutiae offences.

Ultimately, it's a make-or-break game for Sony's handheld. If you can ignore its faults there's an above-average first-person shooter with interesting ideas, and as the inaugural FPS on the console it confirms that a fulfilling and comprehensive experience in the genre can be produced. That game isn't *Resistance*, but it's a positive outlook for the future of Vita.

VERDICT 6/10
NARROWLY MISSES THAT TARGET



DOWNLOADABLE MILLIONAIRE LOVE-RAT'S EURO HOLIDAY SHOCKER

UEFA Euro 2012

Like Spain's dominance of world football, EA's best era began with *Euro 2008*. New features were tested, and thus *FIFA*'s recent evolution began to gestate. As full releases, the last two championship-specific titles improved upon the annual release with a handful of minor tweaks. EA has long been lambasted for milking each tournament licence with an extra game, but the introduction of *UEFA Euro 2012* as downloadable content misfires on many different levels.

Oddly, the Euro 2012 licence isn't utilised enough. We have the customary graphics that flower across the screen, a handful of new kits and updated squads, but it doesn't quite feel right. One of the biggest strengths of the 2010 FIFA World Cup game was that it replicated the buzz of South Africa excellently, from the menu upwards. Here, a lick of paint doesn't hide the *FIFA 12* soundtrack, and fails to overshadow a hint of laziness.

Much better are the stadiums you'll play in. With new camera angles and an excitable atmosphere, on-pitch proceedings feel alien for a while, as any nerve-wracking encounter should. Yet commentary is as robotic and irritating as ever, often claiming you've been eliminated after a win.

While the *FIFA 12* gameplay remains firmly in place, EA has obviously fiddled with a few things to ensure maximum drama. Referees are typically European, stopping play for the most generous of fouls whenever possible. Penalties are also commonplace, as any nip in the area seems to result in a spot-kick for the opposition. This is frustrating, but at least reminiscent of a European match-up.

Despite the extra content's name, the actual Euro 2012 mode is rather disappointing. For some strange reason, qualifying rounds are nowhere to be seen. If you want to take England from the groups to glory, your best option is to make a custom tournament in *FIFA 12*. The online version is more entertaining if you can put up with constant battles against Spain, and of course, a few connection hiccups.

Far more enticing is Expedition mode. Essentially, this is a slight spin on *FIFA Street*'s main single-player affair. You begin with a group of footballing chumps, and travel across Europe collecting new players. Starting out against teams such as San Marino, victory lets you build a road to another country. Lose, and that road is often eliminated. After beating a team once you are given one of their reserve players, twice sends a substitute your way, and a third time means you'll nab a first-team star. The trouble is, the player selection is random, meaning you'll likely receive Gareth Barry when you're holding out for Wayne Rooney.

For the price, this package is rather limited. We've undoubtedly got to the point where *FIFA*'s progression is tiptoeing forward – the big leaps of the last few years have been so significant that EA doesn't seem to have anything new to add here. Perhaps that's why *UEFA Euro 2012* is download only.



FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PlayStation 3, PC
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Electronic Arts
DEVELOPER: EA Canada
PRICE: 1,800 Microsoft Points
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-22
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

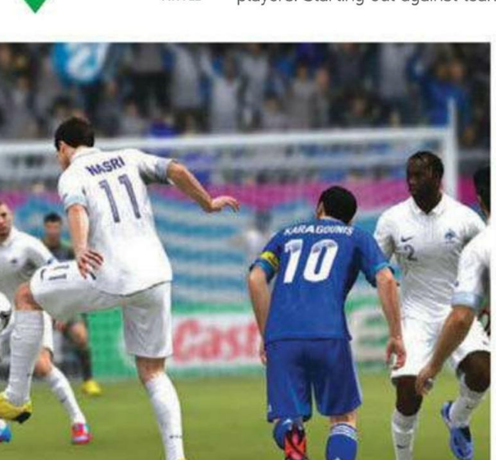
WHAT IF I WANT TO PLAY AS WALES?: All the European teams are included, but many player names aren't licensed. Which is fairly bizarre, as they are in *FIFA 12*. A cynical move, or is EA strapped for cash?



GOES DOWN OUTSIDE THE BOX



Below: Stadiums are replicated excellently, with superb match-day atmosphere.





Above: Expect the in-game commentators to provide a few interesting titbits on the competing nations, over and over again...



Don't worry, there is plenty of *Call Of Duty* coverage elsewhere in this magazine.

AN ADVENTURE GAME WITH ORGANIC PUZZLES

Botanicula

As anyone who has ventured into the worlds of either *Samarost* or *Machinarium* knows, Amanita Design doesn't make standard point-and-click adventures so much as it does cursor-based flights of exploration and experimentation. The developer's games offer little in the way of handholding, puzzles based on real-world logic, a driving narrative or even nod-nod-wink-wink humour to aid adventurers; rather, players are thrown into each game world blind, and tasked with learning an entirely new visual language using little more than their own ingenuity as a Rosetta Stone. In this respect, *Botanicula* is no different – in fact, it's closer to the team's browser-based efforts than its robot-loving masterwork. However, the level of originality in its puzzles and sheer depth of character exhibited by its fascinating world make it an absolute joy, regardless of the legwork required to meet the Czech developer halfway.

It's an odyssey of context-sensitive button presses, where much of the play time is spent looking for areas where the cursor flicks from an arrow to a pointing hand and clicking the mouse to see what might happen. Yet even without clicking, the world responds beautifully to the cursor's searching swoops across the screen – leaves rustle and some unnamable creatures skirt around to avoid it – to the extent that this functionally familiar arrow becomes a character in the world in its own right, a sixth explorer to accompany the silent team of oddballs the player is charged with helping, as unique and seemingly out of place as the menagerie of bugs that populate the rest of the game world.

Admittedly, on open levels, the tile-based map is basically a series of tree branches, which aren't blessed with a great deal of memorable geography and demand a fair amount of ground to be re-trod on a regular basis. However, the levels themselves are fairly self-contained, and to complain might be a little to close to whinging about walking back through the most beautiful park on Earth in order to return to your car.

Unburdened as it is by age-rated language or sophisticated multi-button controls, *Botanicula* is genuinely a game for all ages; the sort of adventure an entire family can sit down and enjoy together without presenting a barrier to anyone based on intelligence or gaming ability. The fact it manages to achieve this feat without pandering to its audience as though they were five-year-olds – and in fact demands more of its players than most games in order to fathom its surreal setting and bizarre cast of characters – is a remarkable achievement in a modern industry that increasingly plays it safe and skirts the lowest common denominator in order to turn a tidy profit. In an ideal world, any team charged with making a motion controlled title for Kinect or PlayStation Move would be forced to play it.

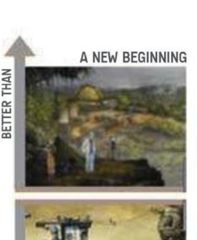
DETAILS

FORMAT: Mac
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: Czech Republic
PUBLISHER: Amanita Design
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: $10.00 (£6.00)
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

A NEW BEGINNING





MACHINARIUM

WORSE THAN

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

B-KIRK!: You could search from now until the end of time and you wouldn't find another game that asks the player to find 14 chickens to power a series of hamster wheels in a village inhabited by chestnuts. No sir.

VERDICT 8/10

STRANGE, CHALLENGING AND BEAUTIFUL

LIKE YOUR GAMING TO BE OLD-SCHOOL?

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6. HOGS OF WAR
7. FLIGHT SIMS
8. ~~DOUBLE DRAGON~~
9. JACK TRAMIEL
10. ~~THUNDER FORCE III~~
11. AKIRA
12. METROID
13. LENNIE MOORE
14. COBRA
15. ALIEN SYNDROME

ALL THIS AND MORE INSIDE THE NEW ISSUE OF **RETRO GAMER!**

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MOTION REJECTED

Datura





Above: The leafy wood is your starting hub, each task unlocking a new area and most take you far beyond the trappings of the forest. Some of the excursions are just plain surreal...

Considering that it was born in the same screw-loose manger that spawned *Linger In Shadows* – the early PSN demo scene migraine – it's clear going into *Datura* that it is not your average videogame. Hell, it's not really a game at all, more another experimental display of boundary pushing as the Polish team invites players to dust off their PlayStation Move controllers and put them to good use. Well, some use at least.

Like *Heavy Rain Move Edition* before it, *Datura* isn't so much the adept demonstration of tactile motion control it thinks it is but rather a showreel for the shortcomings of the input method. Navigation is simple enough, if clumsy, with Move used to guide a disembodied hand about the screen, with shakes, tilts and tugs performing the relevant on-screen actions.

However, unless we missed the part where it was revealed that the protagonist was the worst door-opener of all time, there's no excuse for how hit-and-miss control in general is – motions, once you eventually manage to get the floating hand to interact with whatever random object you find, are vague and ill-registered, presenting an unnecessary barrier in completing what are actually some incredibly simple and obvious tasks. There's an element of old-school point-and-click pixel hunting to *Datura*'s in-game exploration too, trawling the picturesque sea of red herrings for that one little trinket that will further the string of seemingly unconnected daydreams.

And although immersion is often shattered by inadequate control, those rare moments when you're not called to perform abstract gestures or struggling to do something so simple as picking up an object can be spellbinding. Hauntingly beautiful one moment and oddly sinister the next, it's certainly a ride worth taking, if only to take in the scenery and see where the developer takes you next. It's a game that constantly and intentionally goes against the grain – to the point where you even have to wonder if control is purposefully sloppy in some kind of post-modern ploy to screw with players further still – and for that reason it'll rub many up the wrong way before it's even had a chance to get going.

Still, *Datura* is an excellent proof of concept, if we assume that the concept is that motion control simply isn't a substitute for the accuracy of traditional control in the majority of games. To have so vibrant and imaginative a world laid on for you only to be slapped in the face by a disembodied hand whenever you try to explore it is a crushing disappointment, but its originality makes it recommendable all the same, provided you go into the experience aware of the crippling control issues. Its themes demand discussion and its rendering respect, making it all the more frustrating that *Datura* is just the latest casualty of chasing a motion control bubble that burst several years ago.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 3
ORIGIN: Poland
PUBLISHER: Sony
DEVELOPER: Plastic
PRICE: £6.49
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN



LINGER IN SHADOWS

AS GOOD AS



HEAVY RAIN

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

OUT OF CONTROL: *Datura*'s imagination and style are both exceptional, so it's a shame to see the experience marred by poorly executed motion control. That said, the DualShock control option is somehow even worse.

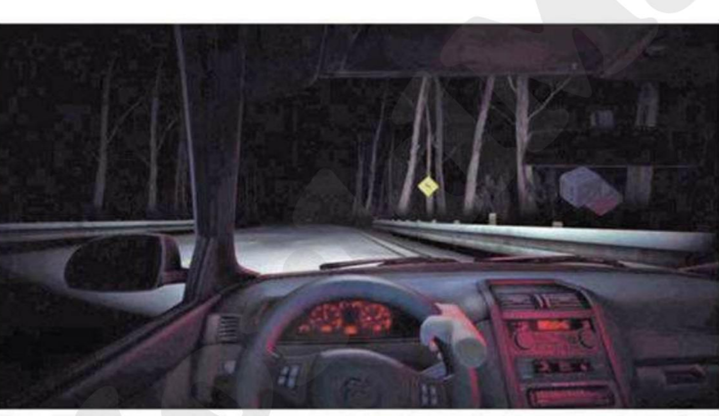


VERDICT 4/10

A DAMAGED YET FASCINATING GAMING CURIO

Below: One moment you're crawling through a thicket after a pig, the next you're driving a car in the most mundane driving sequence in recent memory. *Datura* is nothing if not diverse.





FALLS ON ITS OWN SWORD

Akai Katana Shin

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Rising Star
DEVELOPER: Cave
PRICE: £19.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: TRIGGERHEART EXELICA

AS GOOD AS: DEATHSMILES

As Cave continues to make Xbox 360 its second home, we're into the second wave of shooters from the legendary studio. With the likes of *Deathsmiles* and *DoDonPachi* now available, can we expect something even fresher from the somewhat unknown *Akai Katana*?

The answer is no – sorry for ruining the suspense – although *Akai Katana* is still an enjoyable shooter. *Akai Katana*'s main gimmick is in its shield Summon. Building up your green bar buys extra time for how long your Summoned ally stays out. When called, the Summon locks into place, firing out its own beam of death while your ship raises a shield, blocking dangers (each bullet knocks a chunk of time from how long your Summon stays out). When the time drains, your ship reverts to vulnerable form.

This is your main defensive tactic, as each Summon completely drains your bar, so you have to judge the right time to blow your meter so you can safely navigate through the bullet storm ahead. Cleverly, it can also be used as an offensive tactic, as the Summon beam is the easiest way to rack up combos. Initially a desperation measure for panicked newcomers, seasoned players will learn to turn the gameplay mechanic into a tool for chasing high scores.

The problem with *Akai Katana*, even with its three variations in Origin, Slash and Climax, is that there's nothing here that we haven't seen in other shoot-'em-ups on Xbox 360. It doesn't have the puzzle tilt of *Ikaruga*, the quirkiness of *Guwange*, the enchanting design of *Deathsmiles* or back-to-the-wall bullet hell of *DonDonPachi*. That's not to say that *Akai Katana* doesn't have those elements, but rather that it can feel like an indistinct blend of the genre rather than something with its own standout identity. The closest it comes is with large, military bosses such as tanks and helicopters, but even they feel as though they've stumbled from *Metal Slug* into a more serious game rather than something unique to *Akai Katana*.

Akai Katana is also, bizarrely, rather easy – a complaint rarely heard in the genre. Bar the Origin variant, the challenge doesn't scale up significantly until the last two levels, where use of the Summon mechanic to survive switches from optional extra to necessary bullet shield. A big part of the genre's appeal is learning how to survive, then how to thrive, then how to pick the largest score possible from the menacing, snarling teeth of each wave of enemies. The muted difficulty here renders a huge chunk of that process void.

Even so, the saviour is that the Summon can be used offensively, and that will draw you back for your leaderboard runs. This is what demands you learn *Akai Katana* inside out, when you should gamble, the best way to beat bosses and how to combo through waves of enemies. It's a good shooter, then, but one that struggles to hit the same heights of Cave's other Xbox 360 output.

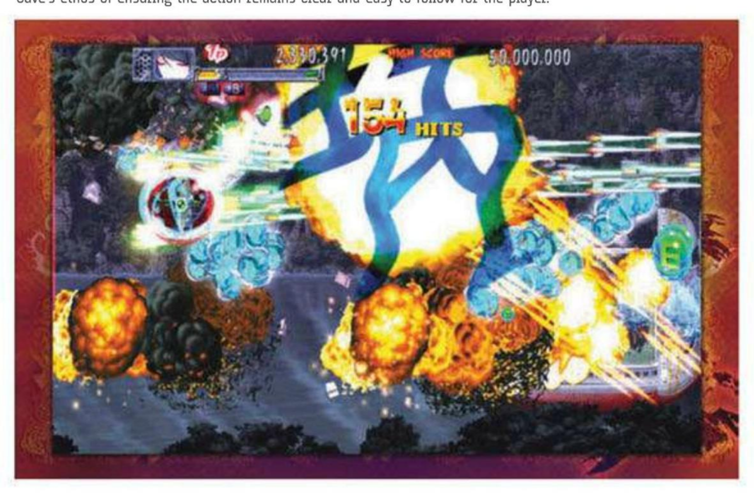
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

SHIELD ME: The Summon mechanic has been used before in various shooters, such as *Guwange* (sort of), but never in a fashion that demands you pick the right time to use it as well.



Above: Although the screen fills with clutter during manic sequences, *Akai Katana* always adheres to Cave's ethos of ensuring the action remains clear and easy to follow for the player.





Above: When Summoning, you can absorb some damage without losing a life, although this eats into your time in Summoned form. It's the key mechanic to survive the tricky later levels.

VERDICT 6/10
A SOLID SHOOTER THAT LACKS THE EXPECTED CAVE SPARK

LITTLE BIG ALBION

Fable Heroes

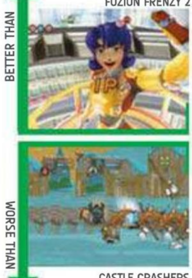
DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Microsoft
DEVELOPER: Lionhead Studios
PRICE: 800 Microsoft Points
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

FUZION FRENZY 2





CASTLE CRASHERS

WORSE THAN

When exactly did *Fable* morph into a kids' game? Not that there's anything wrong with making entertainment for the little ones, of course, but it's still unusual to see a series once synonymous with ambition and innovation now hankering for a few of those lucrative *Lego* bucks.

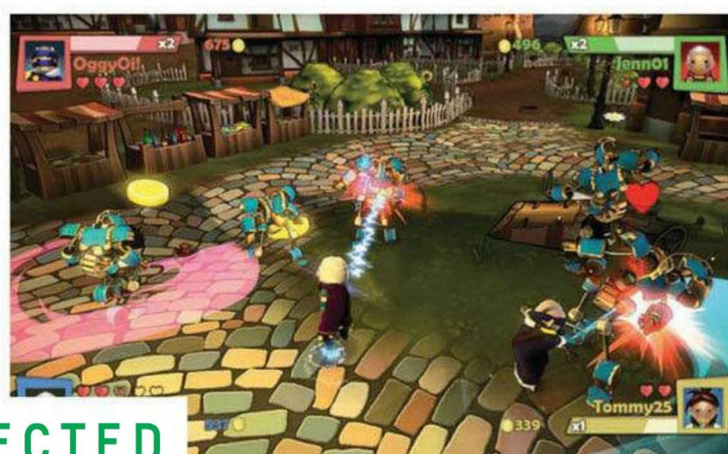
Fable Heroes does indeed closely resemble the *Lego* games, except where Travellers Tales' legacy oozes charm and variety, Lionhead's entrant into the Xbox Live Arcade Next promotion is a game about hitting. Hitting, hitting and hitting. It's a rudimentary co-op hack-and-slash effort that sees you and three chums plodding through Albion's most famous landmarks, hoovering up coins, killing all comers and generally wondering what the hell happened to your life.

It's almost impossible to fathom just who this is for. Yes, *Fable II* and *III* made concessions to appeal to a general audience, but anyone who's experienced the richness and wit of those games will surely be bored stiff by *Fable Heroes*' monotonous baddie-thwacking. And as for the kids, will they have any affection for the likes of Hammer, Garth and Reaver? It's not very likely.

Presumably it's meant as a family game, given the brief *Mario Party*-esque dice-rolling intervals between each pad-thumping stage. Here you can send your puppet around a simple board, and then buy upgrades based on the square he or she lands on, but a confusing menu and lack of worthwhile character improvements makes it feel redundant.



Above: The art style borrows lightly from *LittleBigPlanet*. The idea is puppetry, although you'd only know that from the button in the logo and the fact you're asked to choose a puppet before you begin your quest.



CONNECTED

EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY

MONEY FOR NOTHING: In a *Fable* tradition, coins collected in *Heroes* can be converted and used in the upcoming Kinect effort *Fable: The Journey*. Presumably to nourish to your horse.

Perhaps the only bright spot in *Fable Heroes*' otherwise rainy day is the chance to grief your cohorts. Certain chests dotted throughout the levels give you the option of picking a good or bad outcome (the closest the game ever gets to aping *Fable*'s traditional moral dichotomy). Bad is always the best, resulting in a tag game that sees the person who's 'it' chased by a storm cloud that sporadically zaps with coin-losing lightning, like some sort of defiantly British *Sonic The Hedgehog* enemy. It injects a bit of personality into the relentless grind.

Actually, there is the odd bit of character and humour dotted throughout. The jaunt through Mistpeak sees you fighting Hobbes in Santa hats with candy canes instead of axes (a bit odd for an April release, but never mind) and there are some lovely views of a picture book Albion sprawling into the background as you stroll through the levels. Just a shame, then, that what you're actually doing during that time is so uninteresting.

Considering the recent quality of XBLA titles (*Fez*, *Trials Evolution*, even *Alan Wake's American Nightmare*) *Fable Heroes* feels like a bit of a black sheep. It's a mindless, thumb-unfriendly trudge of a game, and while it performs its chosen task moderately well, it's about as ambitious and captivating as a drizzle-soaked walk to the local shop with no money in your pockets.



Above: There are branching paths at the end of each level, which unlock a different competitive minigame for you and your cohorts to battle through. One sees you escaping from exploding chickens, while another is a toboggan race down a mountain.

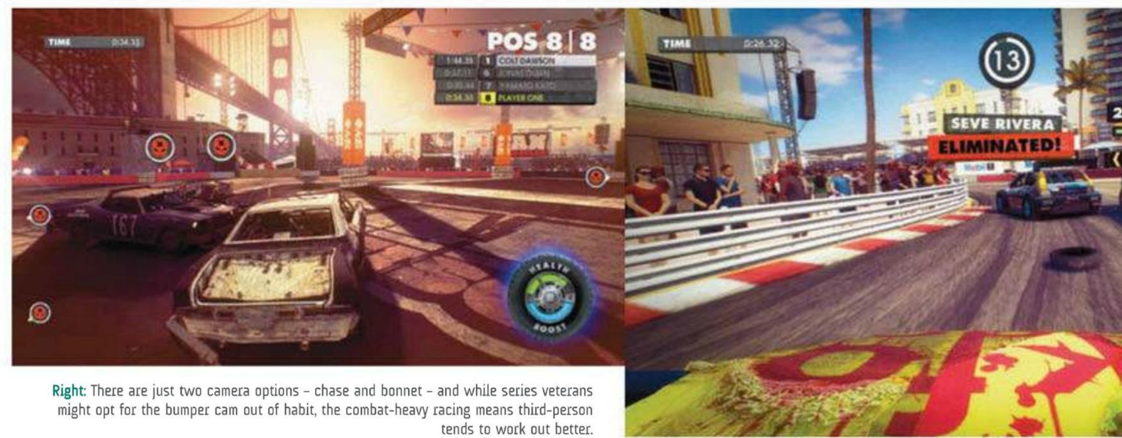
VERDICT 4/10

NOTHING TRULY HEROIC COULD EVER BE THIS BORING

IT JUST DREDGES UP ALL THE SAME PROBLEMS THAT PLAGUED DESTRUCTION DERBY BACK IN THE DAY

CALL OF DIRTY

The popularity of multiplayer shooters has a lot to answer for. Elements of the kill-the-man phenomenon have been creeping into our other games for some time now, though they've seldom been as jarring as they are in *Dirt Showdown*. Resetting crashed cars on the track is nothing new, but having them dissolve into wireframe models and respawn after they're written off in an arena-based combat environment is just plain weird, removing all threat from every mode except 8-Ball. There are a lot of features we've called for in seeing *Dirt* raised to the top of its game – respawning and superfluous health gauges, unsurprisingly, are not among their number.



Right: There are just two camera options – chase and bonnet – and while series veterans might opt for the bumper cam out of habit, the combat-heavy racing means third-person tends to work out better.

CRASH, BANG, WALLOP… WHAT A VIDEOGAME

Dirt Showdown

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PC, PlayStation 3
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Codemasters
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-2 (2-8 online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

In a wonderful feat of irony, it has taken a stock car racing and demolition derby game to alert us to the fact that games have ruined demolition derbies and stock car racing. While once it might have been considered entertaining to go and watch a selection of clapped-out bangers jostle their way around a dirt track, seeing the odd panel get dented or door tumble off can never compare to the explosive car combat of the likes of *Flatout* and *Burnout*. Games can't be held exclusively accountable when Hollywood's tinderbox garage goes up in smoke at the first sign of a collision, but gaming gives vehicular carnage that much more impact, invincible drivers where usually sit humans with some self-preservation instinct. And sure, it was impressive back in the PSone days when *Destruction Derby* landed with its 3D cars and real-time damage modelling, but we've come a long way since then. And frustratingly, that's one memo that Codemasters seemingly didn't get when deciding on a new direction in which to steer its slowly stagnating racer.

We've seen this before, as well. After years of incrementally improving rally games – and the death of the racing legend whose name they carried – the *Colin McRae* franchise mutated into *Dirt*, fusing the classic driving model with a healthy serving of Americana and redneck truck porn to create a somewhat confused racer. Subsequent *Dirt* titles saw the action fall back towards the older games but here, the decision to once again shake things up feels as forced as it did last time. Now, the not-so-secret ingredient is Psygnosis' car crash PSone launch title *Destruction Derby*, with stadium courses, crumbling stock cars and makeshift arenas where once were rolling hills, licensed rally cars and picturesque rally stages.

The biggest problem with this change of tack is that it just dredges up all the same problems that plagued *Destruction Derby* back in the day. Arena-based events are devoid of any kind of skill-based gameplay – floor it towards the nearest opponent and hope nothing sideswipes you before you get a fistful of arbitrarily awarded points, or just do laps of the area if survival is the goal. To make matters worse, the scoring system is fundamentally broken, not only cheating you out of points that should be rewarded for chain reaction hits and contested 'kills' but also seemingly deciding at random how it grades and rewards impacts. 8-Ball mode is a step in the right direction, blending car combat with more traditional circuit racing. But with courses designed to have several overlaps and bottlenecks, it's clear that this spectator sport doesn't really pan out so well as a competitive challenge – in fact, it's one of the most misjudged modes ever to make it into a racing game. The game might just as well declare a winner on the starting line, such is the pointless and random nature of the mode, especially as lap counts creep up and race-ending tail swipes and T-bones become crushingly predictable and endlessly annoying.

More frustrating, though, is the quality that Codemasters' latest racer demonstrates elsewhere. When it decides to be a more traditional racer, for instance, *Showdown* is as good as anything else the studio has done in recent years. Handling, while far more accessible and arcade-like than the usual model, is sublime and makes everything from a deft overtaking move to attempted vehicular manslaughter as simple as can be. Visuals are similarly excellent (as expected), loading screens offering a virtual tour of the outlandish stock cars while tracksides bustle with a level of activity and colour that almost makes up for the lack of rally settings.

Tour mode guides you through a decent array of events that play to both *Showdown*'s strengths and weaknesses, though few of these offer much of a challenge. Well, not a fair one at least – race-ending pile-ups and shunts are commonplace, and bizarrely, only the trick-based modes offer the rewind function that could alleviate these frustrating punchlines to otherwise great routines. It's a solid structure and one that doesn't demand perfection across the board – bronze medals are enough to scrape onto the next event, so the only thing you miss out on by not bringing home the gold is a little cash, which is more or less redundant once you've got a couple of fully upgraded cars to choose between anyway.

In a post-*Burnout* climate, however, no amount of fireworks, announcers and flashy rides can mask the fact that the act of crashing is far better realised elsewhere. Smashing up other cars should be far more satisfying than it is here, something glazed over by the fact that crash replays are tucked away behind a button prompt where Criterion's racers are loud and proud in putting everything else on hold just to show cars getting proper messed up in wince-inducing detail. As a focal point of the game, deformation and crashes need to be more in line with *Showdown*'s arcade handling and the unashamed video game approach that sees cars given actual, labelled 'Health' and 'Boost' bars – we've never heard of a car failing its MOT on account of having low health, but that's probably just because we're not qualified mechanics.

When it's exploring familiar territory, *Dirt Showdown* is another racing delight from one of the most capable studios in the business. But when it decides to do an impression of an old PlayStation game instead, things don't work out nearly as well. It's a classic example of a developer trying to evolve, and that's commendable, but few would argue it has worked in the franchise's favour here. It won't take much to get the series back on track and the superb handling model means that multiplayer will likely shine. But that's not going to stop our advice to Codemasters being some words of wisdom we heard from a satnav: 'Please make a U-turn where possible'.



Above: Dominating track segments makes for one of the game's most interesting and addictive modes, promoting clever use of boost and driving skill like nothing else in *Showdown*'s arsenal.



AS GOOD AS — FLATOUT 3



WORSE THAN — BURNOUT 3: TAKEDOWN

FAQs

Q. IT'S AN ARCADE GAME?
Basically. Series fans may wish for its former depth.

Q. HOW ARE THE EVENTS?
Anything that involves straight racing is fine; stunt-based stuff fares worse.

Q. OUTSIDE OF TOUR MODE?
There's multiplayer, or a Tony Hawk-esque free run mode where you can explore and do stunts and missions.



Left: Ice racing tends to be a rally game's most challenging aspect, though *Showdown*'s simple handling model makes it little more taxing than racing on any other surface.

MISSING LINK
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

STUNTED GROWTH: The focus on crashes and 'tricks' is a step in the wrong direction, the kind of move you'd expect to see from a racer without the mechanics that Codemasters has proven time and time again.



VERDICT 6/10
MECHANICALLY SOUND BUT LACKING IN IMPACT



VALKYRIA CHRONICLES OF THE SWORD

Shining Blade



Above: Characters from previous title *Shining Hearts* appear in *Blade*, reintroducing the sort of cross-series continuity that old school *Shining* games used to do so well.

Of all the modern *Shining* games that needed the word *Force* in the title, *Shining Blade* is it. This isn't just the closest to its strategy-RPG core that the series has come since 1998; it also happens to be an evolution that original developer Camelot may well have taken if it had remained in charge.

Basically taking the system and engine from *Valkyria Chronicles*, *Shining Blade* works as though the series was always meant to be played this way. Ranged characters like archers and spellcasters fit perfectly into a template originally intended for faux-WWII artillery, while melee weapons like swords, hammers and lances work surprisingly well. There's a real element of risk that comes with getting in so close – strategic players will soften enemies first with a few arrows – while the addition of multiple targets per enemy adds a tactical element beyond mere battlefield placement. Boss monsters especially feature lots of targets across their body, including one that has to be broken to reveal a weak point, and therefore require more planning and teamwork than the *Shining* bosses of old.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PSP
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Sega
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: ¥6,279 (UMD) ¥5,600 (PSN)
RELEASE: TBA (JAPAN: OUT NOW)
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Shining Blade's greatest triumph is that it feels like a proper team game. Assembling a squad of five for each quest demands that every member be picked to complement another, while the addition of team-up attacks, and an escort function allowing two characters to run together, ups the camaraderie considerably. Furthermore, the new Songstress ability, allowing certain characters to sing ballads that magically enhance the team, puts further emphasis on cooperation, while the option to switch signature weapons on major characters, changing their appearance and special powers, means there's loads of fiddling to do on a squad customisation level.

The lack of *Valkyria*-style permadeath, however, does limit just how far this team spirit can go. With no sense of ultimate consequence, *Shining Blade* feels a step behind some of its peers, and discourages the sort or careful play that can make strategy games so intense. For the first ten hours at least, *Blade*'s quests are a walk in the park, and even the tougher battles can be overcome by going away and grinding for a while. Most damagingly, new elements poached from other Sega games, including personality traits that buff or debuff characters in certain situations, or out-of-battle relationship building conversations, can practically be ignored without any detriment to success.

Still, by borrowing from Sega's superior SRPG series, *Shining Blade* is at least a step in the right direction, back towards and potentially beyond what the brand does best. Now let's just hope that Sega sees fit to build on these strengths in another instalment rather than throwing away the rule book yet again.

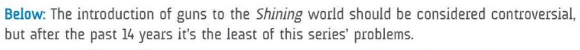
MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

DIFFICULTY: All of the ingredients are there to make *Shining Blade* a fantastic SRPG, but the lack of challenge and permanent consequence omits some much-needed tension from the game.

VERDICT 6/10

GOOD FOR SHINING FANS, BUT A STEP BEHIND VALKYRIA


Below: The introduction of guns to the *Shining* world should be considered controversial, but after the past 14 years it's the least of this series' problems.





LIKE SIMON SAYS, ONLY CHAIRED BY AN IDIOT

Frobisher Says

It's a little troubling just how blatantly Sony is peeking over Nintendo's shoulder at the back of the exam hall at the moment. Move came along and turned out to be a slightly more competent Wii Remote rather than anything genuinely new, while the newly-announced PlayStation *All-Stars Battle Royale* shamelessly lounges in a *Smash Bros.*-shaped hole in Sony's catalogue. But on top of that, there's *Frobisher Says* – a patently ridiculous minigame collection in the *WarioWare* mould, and for better or for worse it's even more surreal and messed up than Nintendo's hectic franchise.

Essentially, *Frobisher Says* is a Vita tech demo. Each of the 40-odd minigames addresses one or more of Vita's unique control options – you might be asked to tilt the machine to keep a unicycling unicorn balanced one minute and employ both the rear touch panel and touch screen to squish Plasticine toffs the next, for instance. The games are the expected mix in terms of quality, something that becomes more of an issue here than in *WarioWare* as the minigames are thrust on you for longer and more often due to the meagre total. Just as in the Nintendo series, things get a little more frenzied as the game runs its course, but the kind of playful curveballs Wario throws at you to toy with expectations are sadly far rarer in frequency here.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS Vita
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Sony
DEVELOPER: Honeyslug
PRICE: Free
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-8
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

WELCOME PARK





WORSE THAN

WARIOWARE DIY



Below: Linked games are a neat feature that could be played up – draw a face on an egg in one game, for instance, then smash it to pieces a few tasks down the line.

Worse, though, is the fact that there's very little meat on *Frobisher*'s bones, which probably explains why Sony saw fit to give it away free of charge. There's just one mode – a gauntlet of nonsense that randomly throws you into a sequence of unlocked games – though it can be played either to a fixed number of games (as a light but unbalanced score attack experience) or in Sudden Death mode, where a single failure is enough to end your run. Throw in a second player (or better yet a few more) for pass-and-play and *Frobisher* becomes a hoot, the giggles and grins you had when going into the game for the first time replicated in seeing someone else baffled by Frobisher's ludicrous requests.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

OVERKILL: Minigames speed up a little in line with the *WarioWare* template, but it never quite gets frantic enough to hit the same highs as Nintendo's bonkers series.

In fact, watching other people play is all it takes to reveal the chief problem with *Frobisher Says*. The first time, most of the games are hilarious (in concept, in control or sometimes in both) but as the surprises start to dry up, so too does the fun. As a demo of Vita's wealth of input methods, *Frobisher Says* deserves to be pre-loaded on all new hardware in place of the mundane *Welcome Park*. But truth be told, you probably won't play it much more than you did that minimalist introduction to the Vita, at least outside of passing *Frobisher* around a group of friends for a brief but potent burst of crazy entertainment.

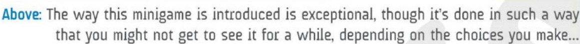


VERDICT 6/10

MORE WALUIGIWARE THAN WARIOWARE







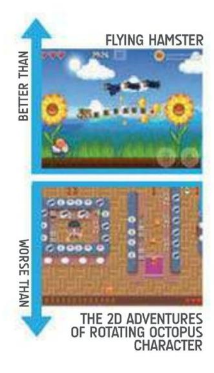
Above: The way this minigame is introduced is exceptional, though it's done in such a way that you might not get to see it for a while, depending on the choices you make…

LAKITU'S GOT NOTHING ON THIS GUY

Floating Cloud God Saves The Pilgrims

DETAILS

FORMAT: PSP
OTHER FORMATS: PlayStation 3, PS Vita
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Dakko Dakko
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £1.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Transparency, simplicity, playability and style… these are the four pillars on which Dakko Dakko has established itself as one to watch on the indie scene in the space of just two games. Its first was a puzzle-platform game with an ingenious and deceptively deep rule set, this second release similarly clever but with its roots instead in arcade shooter territory.

As the titular deity, you're tasked with protecting a flock of loyal worshippers as they lemming their way right in search of enlightenment. Smite their would-be murderers with your windy breath and they'll show their gratitude with hearts – collecting their love powers up your attacks, which is handy since every shot makes you a little bit weaker. Hearts even increase in value and size for every kill made while they're on-screen, leading to a novel risk/reward mechanic where you find yourself trying to maximise their worth without letting them fade away.

Clever use of the two available shot types – a horizontal shot that loosely follows your travel direction and a vertical bombardment – is demanded as the game progresses, the surprisingly strong enemy line-up full of demons and critters that must be handled in their own particular way. Bosses take this a step further still and, though they're seldom too tricky to overcome, they're undeniably well-designed and entertaining.

There's a superb balance to the action too, the size of your following directly dictating difficulty since a larger group give stray bullets more targets to potentially claim. You're free to retry stages as many times as you'd like in order to save the lot as well, and restarting turns out to be far more addictive than it probably should. Between simple, well thought-out mechanics, a charming art style and compelling bite-sized gameplay, Dakko Dakko strikes again with one of gaming's rarest offerings – an escort mission that's actually fun.

VERDICT 8/10

THE MARCH OF THE MINIS CONTINUES



THERE GOES OUR K/D RATIO…

774 Deaths



Right: Yeah, you're right – just having all the spiky things *would* be too easy. Might as well chuck in an arbitrary time limit. Sigh.

DETAILS

FORMAT: iPhone
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Square Enix
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £2.49
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



We like nothing more than a good challenge. We've conquered *Super Meat Boy*'s arduous procession of punishment, five-starred 'Through The Fire And Flames' and taken a naked Deprived through the best part of *Dark Souls*, so our masochistic credentials are front and centre. But our point here, buried beneath a little good old-fashioned bragging, is that we've enough experience to know the difference between a game that presents a reasonable challenge and one that just wants to laugh as you fail. And as the name implies, *774 Deaths* is very much the latter.

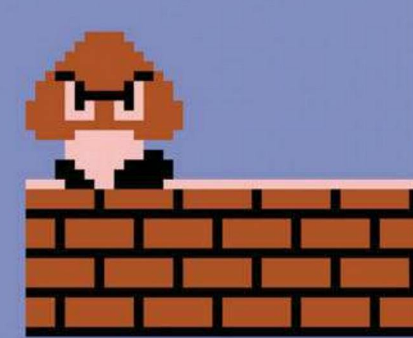
While skill and reactions could feasibly be enough for the best gamers to sight-read their way through *Super Meat Boy*'s most challenging stages on first go, here there's a reliance on horrible surprises and dirty tricks to incite rage and get the profanity flowing. It's a pure memory test, albeit one that requires the kind of pixel-perfect 8-bit timing of the games its art style mimics. It's not so much a difficult game as a downright obnoxious one, though even this clear and present malicious streak can't quell the sense of elation you get from clearing one of the 33 seemingly impossible challenges included.

These fall into several familiar templates – traditional one-button platforming, that iOS staple of auto-run gameplay and tilt-controlled trials – and you don't even vaguely know what you're going to be in for until you see the orientation of the level's start screen. But then, after a few brutally unfair attempts, you might actually have a chance of getting nearly halfway through. Maybe.

The loose structure invites players to wind themselves up further by jumping the gun and skipping to horrific later stages out of sequence, though in a game like this anyone foolish enough to ask for more of a challenge deserves everything they get. Patient souls and confident pros, by all means give this a go. But for anyone less prepared, there's a fair chance *774 Deaths* will leave you with little more than a few creative new compound cusses and the sad realisation that your phone insurance doesn't cover 'accidental, forceful contact with walls'.

VERDICT 6/10
THIS YEAR'S MOST SADISTIC GAME



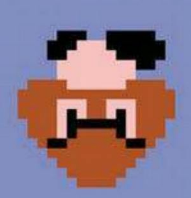


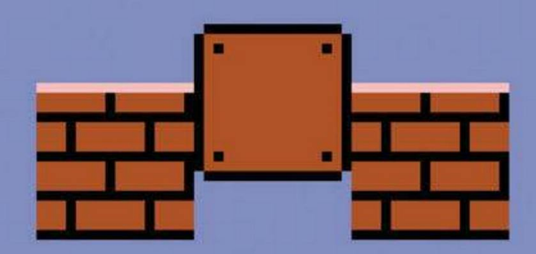


Super Mario Bros.

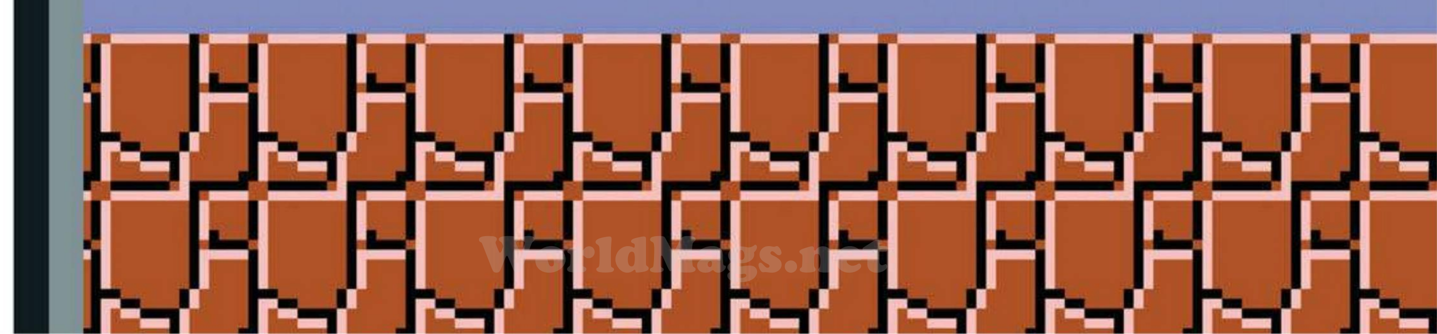
YOSUKE HAYASHI
HEAD OF TEAM NINJA

Japanese developers tend to shy away from openly naming influences and, sure enough, when faced with the task of selecting his favourite game ever, the softly spoken Team Ninja boss can't offer a straight answer. "It's difficult because games have evolved," he explains. "The concept of having a favourite game of all time suggests that all advancement has stopped dead and that one thing is the very best and nothing can top it. Games are meant to progress. There's always meant to be something that is better than the things that came before it." Despite a noble attempt to dodge the question, Hayashi eventually buckles under the pressure. "If I were to give you a hint, it'd be that it involves a chubby guy with a moustache," he laughs. We assume he doesn't mean his favourite game of all time is Ron Jeremy.

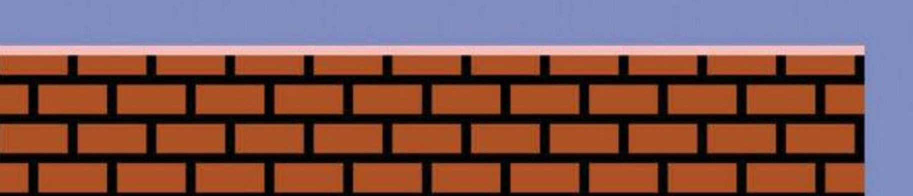


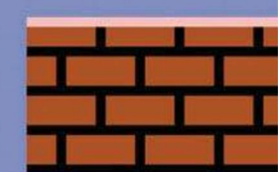






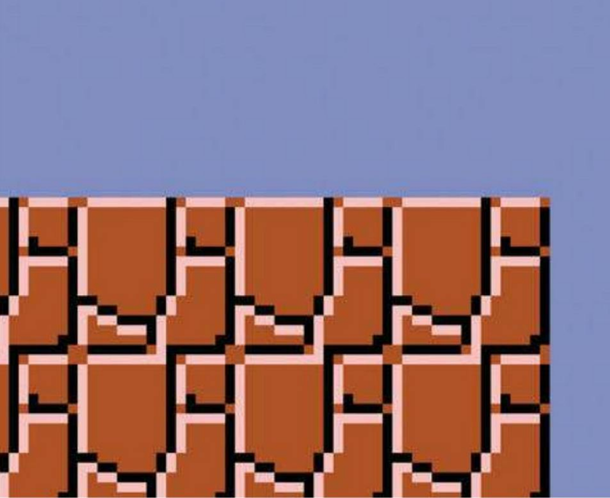






"Games are meant to progress. There's always meant to be something that is better than the things that came before"

YOSUKE HAYASHI, HEAD OF TEAM NINJA





RETRO

>. 'DON'T SHOOT! I'M WITH THE SCIENCE TEAM...'

NO.123 JUNE 2012



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BEHIND THE SCENES

MORTAL KOMBAT

In 1991 the fighting genre belonged to Japan, but the next year the Americans came along and did it their way – louder, more violent and totally headline-grabbing. Original designer John Tobias explains how it was done

FIRST MKI RAIDEN DOODLE BY JOHN TOBIAS



Released: 1992
Format: Arcade
Publisher: Midway
Developer: In-house

KEY STAFF:
John Tobias: Design and Graphics
Ed Boon: Design and Software
Dan Forden: Music and Sounds
John Vogel: Background Graphics

THIS YEAR (WHICH is 2012 if you happen to be reading this in one of our Retro compilations), Capcom is celebrating the 25th anniversary of the fighting game series that put the genre on the map, but while the original *Street Fighter* was little more than a modest success in the arcades, its fiercest competitor erupted onto the scene in an inaugural debut that was much more convincing. This was none other than *Mortal Kombat*, a game that not only paved the way for the Entertainment Software Ratings Board in the United States with its barbaric Fatalities, but was also pieced together by a team of four passionate people in just under a year.

"As a kid I read superhero comics religiously and found myself drawing my favourites at a very early age," states *Mortal Kombat* co-creator John Tobias, who began his career as a comic book artist. "My dream was always to illustrate a *Superman*, *Batman* or *Spider-Man* book, but that kind of changed as I got older. I became more interested in creating my own characters. My work on *The Real Ghostbusters* comic was kind of a letdown because I was in school at the time and needed an income. With the exception of a few issues, my work was always rushed and the publisher was a bit unscrupulous."

WHAT I KNEW OF GRAPHICS AT THE TIME WAS ENTIRELY SELF-TAUGHT

Tobias's frustrations didn't last long. After finishing school, he was hired by Bally Midway on the back of his design skills. "What I knew of computer graphics at the time was entirely self-taught," he confesses. "Schools didn't have much in the way of a curriculum that could prepare you for work in the industry. Fortunately, I was a videogame junkie and arcade rat growing up, so I knew what I liked and what I thought I could provide." But despite the continuing rise of videogames as an entertainment medium, Bally Midway was a pinball purveyor first and foremost. CONTINUED >



SHANG LAO

– TO THE WORLD HE IS A LITTLE KNOWN WARLORD, RULER OF AN ISLAND FORTRESS AND HOST TO A LEGENDARY MARTIAL ARTS TOURNAMENT, IN REALITY, HE IS A DEMON OF VAST DESTUCTIVE POWERS. HE WAS CURSED BY HIS GODS AND MUST DRINK THE BLOO[D] OF TRUE WARRIORS IN ORD[ER] TO APPEASE THEM.

UNKNOWN TO MOST THE PARTICIPANTS, THE KU... IS THE MEANS SHANG LA[O] EMPLOYS TO OBTAIN TH[E] WARRIORS HE NEEDS F[OR] HIS UNHOLY CEREMON[Y]...

SHANG LAO'S ARMY

– ALONG WITH A SMAL[L] POWERFUL ARMY OF ... HENCHMEN, SHANG LAO ALSO UTILIZES T[HE] SERVICES OF TAOIST SORCERORS, THEIR ... MONKS AS WELL AS VARIOUS OTHERWORL[D]...

KITSUNE: SHANG LAO'S PRINCESS DAUGHTER BETRAYS LAO WHEN SHE FALLS FOR KANG.

BACKGROUND (NON PLAYABLE?)

* PALETTE SWAP FOR 2 NINJAS. A HUNTER AND THE HUNTED OR ONE IS RUNNING AWAY FROM CLAN.

MAYBE RIVAL CLANS, REVENGE STORY?

MAYBE LIU KANG AS RENEGADE MONK. LEFT TEMPLE ETC.

ARCHETYPES FOR CHARACTERS

1. LIU KANG = HERO / PROTAGONIST
2. MICHAEL GRIMM = SIDEKICK
3. KURTIS STRYKER = SKEPTIC
4. RAIDEN = MENTOR
5. KANO = TRICKSTER
6. NINJA 1 = HUNTER
7. NINJA 2 = HUNTED
8. GONGORO = THRESHOLD GUARDIAN
9. SHANG LAO = SHAPESHIFTER / ANTAGONIST
10. KITSUNE = HERALD

500 YEARS AGO SHANG LAO CORRUPTS THE SHAOLIN ... [A]FTER GONGORO BECOMES CHAMPION. LAO ... OF DEAD WARRIORS TO STAY IMMORTAL ... HIS GODS.

SHANG LAO'S GODS WANT TO ... THEY USE THE TOURNAMENT TO ... FURIES. WHEN EARTH'S REAL[M] ... LAO'S GOD'S CAN STEP TH[ROUGH] ... [DIM]ENSIO[NAL] GATES.

SHANG LAO'S ISLAN[D] IS THE GATEWAY.

FROM THE FORUM

Posted by:
SNAGGLETOOTH

All I remember at the time, being all of 11 years old, was looking at this game and thinking 'Hell yeah!' at how totally badass it was. Then my dad saw it and forbade me from playing it because it wasn't appropriate. I was just glad I got to play it occasionally round a friend's house. While it wasn't the first violent game, given the nature of the graphics at the time, it's no surprise it was at the head of so much controversy. But at the same time it paved the way over the years for more violence in games.

Posted by:
RICHHOYLE24

I remember spending a ton of 20p pieces trying to get a Double Flawless Victory with a Fatality on the bridge level after hearing a rumour at school about Reptile. I never managed it, but I did feel like a total legend after pulling off Kano's Fatality after nobody in my local arcade knew how to do it.

Posted by:
ALISTAIR_THOMAS

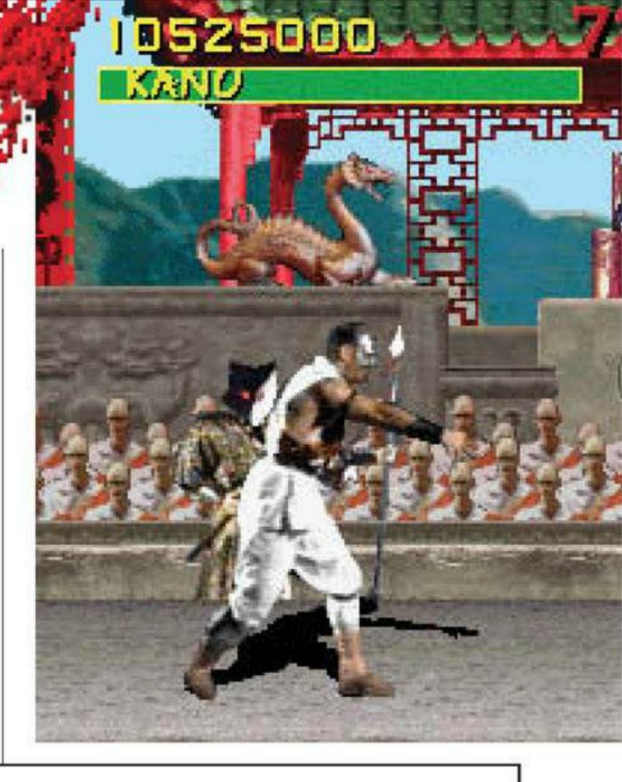
I ended up on the receiving end of some foul language while watching (in comparison to my younger self at the time) a grown-up play. I guess he didn't like my constant advice of 'back, back, punch!' while he was trying to beat Goro.

Posted by:
SLAPPY MCGUIRE

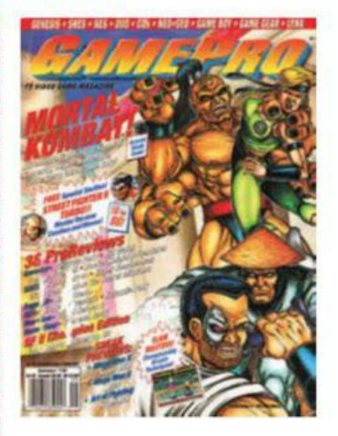
Liu Kang, sounding like a ruddy ninja chipmunk. That's my memory of the arcade game.

Posted by:
TRESDOSS

At the time, Sub-Zero's fatality was the only one anyone seemed to know.... but he was badass so nobody cared.



WHAT THEY SAID...



Genesis gamers will be more than happy with their version of the arcade classic. Until Street Fighter II makes its appearance on the Genesis scene, Mortal Kombat's clearly the king of the Genesis beat-'em-up hill

GamePro, September 1993

"At the time, there were maybe a dozen people in the videogame department," Tobias remembers. "We were like the bastard children of a company that cherished its pinball game division. Our department was in a set of offices in the back of the pinball manufacturing plant. I loved walking through the factory in the morning. It demonstrated the reality of the arcade business, which outside of design and software was this beast of mechanical engineering and industry." And it was during these early days that Tobias worked with Mark Turmell and *Robotron* creator Eugene Jarvis on *Smash TV*.

"Both of those guys were huge influences on me in terms of their work ethic and passion for games," Tobias reminisces. "Eugene was like a god of the industry, although he never carried himself that way. He always made himself accessible, which was very generous considering I was a 19 year-old kid. The department was so small that management gave us creative freedom to do whatever we wanted and they obviously had plenty of faith in guys like Mark and Eugene. I think that freedom played a large part in the department's success."

FOLLOWING THE SUCCESS of *Smash TV*, the foundations of *Mortal Kombat* began to take shape as Tobias started experimenting with the digitising capabilities of the company's development hardware. "Up until that point everything I had done was hand drawn and animated," Tobias reflects. "I thought the larger we could get the characters on screen, the more we could take advantage of digitization. So a fighting game, which would only require two characters on screen, immediately came to mind. I approached Ed Boon [*Mortal Kombat* co-creator, currently at NetherRealm Studios] and he was interested in doing a fighting game as well."

This idea went on to become one of the most gratuitously violent and yet undeniably compelling games of its generation. But if it wasn't for the unavailability of a certain Belgian action hero, *Mortal Kombat* might've been entirely different. "We thought about getting a Hollywood martial artist involved," Tobias recalls, "and I think the company had been contacted regarding the *Universal Soldier* film. We were interested in Van Damme as a martial-arts star who could portray either himself or a character in our game. It didn't pan out for whatever reason, and never got beyond a few phone calls between our licensing guy and Van Damme's agent."

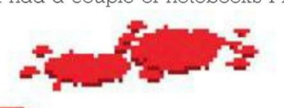

JOHN TOBIAS
Design and graphics

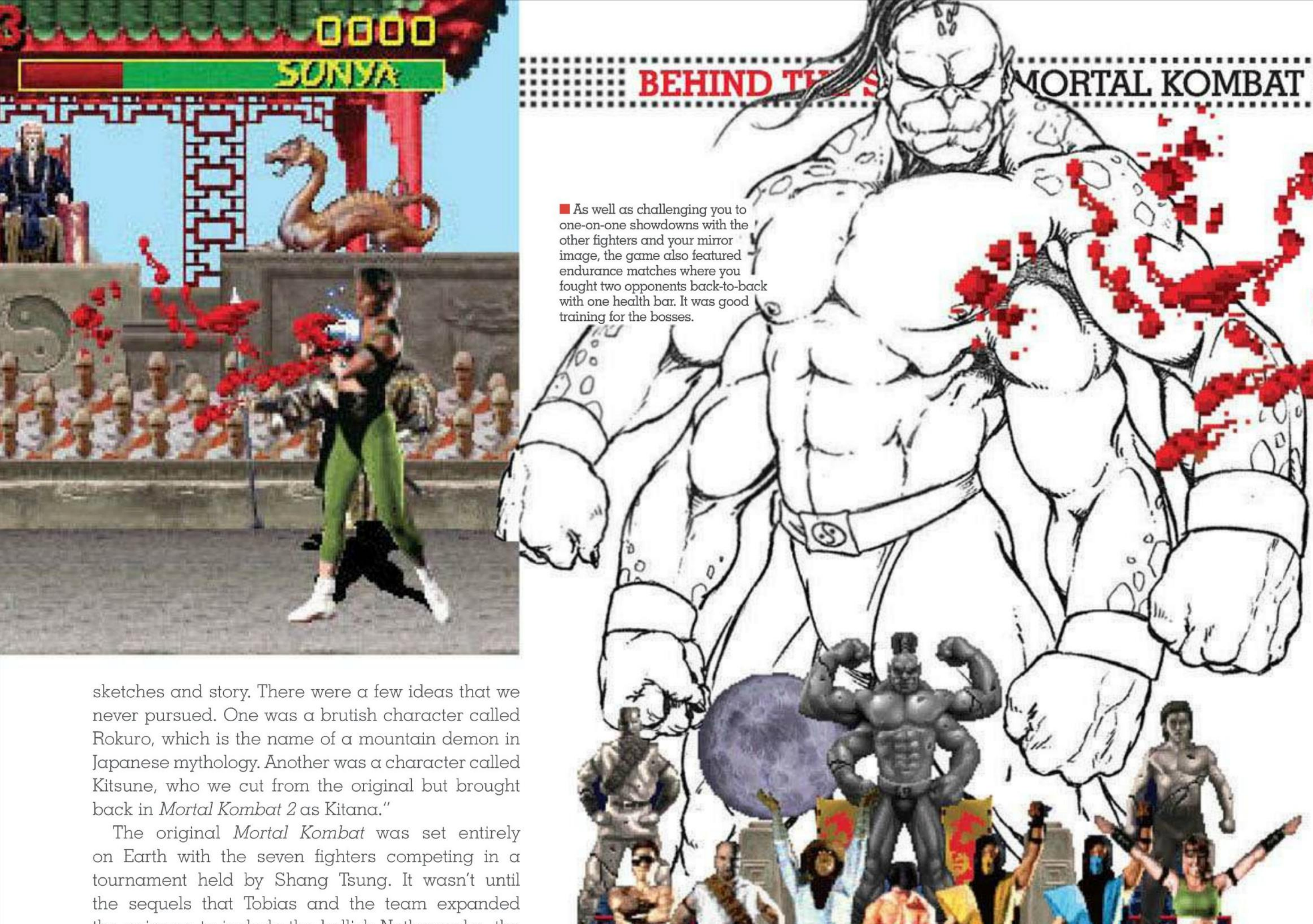
PLAYERS COULD LOOK AT THE CHARACTERS AND UNDERSTAND THE ARCHETYPES

But despite missing out on a different kind of blood sport, the cause for an unlicensed fighting game was given sudden validity with the meteoric rise of the dragon punch. "*Street Fighter II* released and was doing extremely well in arcades," Tobias says. "That was our proof-of-concept because, prior to that, fighting games had only seen limited success. We didn't actually start on *Mortal Kombat* until after Ed and I had finished our prior projects, but I believe we started actual game development around October 1991. We went out for location tests around May 1992 with the finished product shipping August of that year."

What followed was nothing less than a landmark moment as arcade gamers across the globe began to spread the word about Kano, Sonya and the technicolour ninjas. "I looked at the design and creation of the original characters as being a part of the storytelling process," Tobias explains. "I used archetypes to define that first group of characters. Liu Kang was our hero and Johnny Cage was the sidekick. I never had a place to articulate any of that with exposition, but I think the players were able to look at those characters and understand the archetypes almost on a subconscious level."

And even if they didn't, it was clear that *Mortal Kombat* was tapping into a filmic style that lay somewhere between classic kung-fu and blood-soaked horror. "There wasn't a whole lot of conceptual art work done back then," Tobias describes. "I had a couple of notebooks I kept with





■ As well as challenging you to one-on-one showdowns with the other fighters and your mirror image, the game also featured endurance matches where you fought two opponents back-to-back with one health bar. It was good training for the bosses.

sketches and story. There were a few ideas that we never pursued. One was a brutish character called Rokuro, which is the name of a mountain demon in Japanese mythology. Another was a character called Kitsune, who we cut from the original but brought back in *Mortal Kombat 2* as Kitana."

The original *Mortal Kombat* was set entirely on Earth with the seven fighters competing in a tournament held by Shang Tsung. It wasn't until the sequels that Tobias and the team expanded the universe to include the hellish Netherrealm, the otherworldly Outworld and the savage demigod himself, Shao Khan. Each fighter's story was fleshed out with a few words and a static image – which in Raiden's case, portrayed him as a warmongering tyrant. This was totally at odds with the benevolent God of Thunder that fought to save humanity in the numerous sequels that followed.

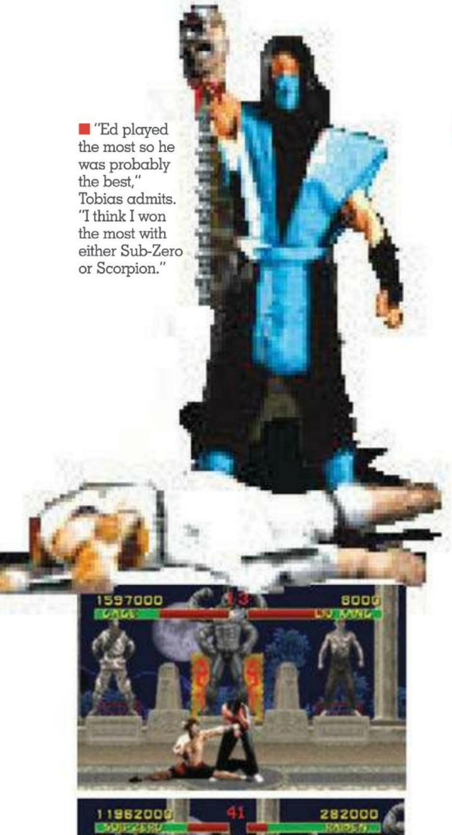
■■■ "I ALWAYS LOOKED at the endings in *Mortal Kombat* as outlandish 'what if?' scenarios," Tobias explains wistfully. "I never considered them as part of the story's canon. Raiden's ending, in particular, built on the source of his character – which was this god called Raijin who was a trickster-type character in Japanese mythology. Our Raiden turned into our own thing as he became more of a mentor in the later games. But the story from *Mortal Kombat* changed very little from its inception. There was always an island gateway to another realm and a tournament with a nefarious host beholden to gods from another realm."

As the series grew and its fictional realms continued to diversify, the roster expanded to include a demonic centaur, ninja cyborgs and a mutant with retractable wrist-blades. But out of all the surprises that Tobias cooked up, the 2,000 year-old half-dragon that acted as *Mortal Kombat*'s unthrowable sub-boss was by far the most memorable. "Goro was inspired by the stop-motion in Ray Harryhausen films like *Jason And The Argonauts*," Tobias confirms. "That was Goro's initial inspiration in terms how to get a more fantastical looking character on-screen in **CONTINUED >**

Switching to Digital

■ "ONE DECISION I made early in development was to let the qualities of captured video dictate the look of the game," Tobias explains when asked about the decision to use digitised sprites rather than hand-drawn graphics. "That was due to the project's schedule and the fact that I was the sole artist responsible. I knew that if I started doing too much frame-by-frame touch-up, I wouldn't be able to keep up with the schedule. But that raw digitised look became a trademark of the first game. It's funny to look at game graphics today in terms of the tools and limitations, and then to look back at just how primitive it was back when I started."

Mortal Kombat wasn't the first fighting game to feature digitised sprites, as that honour goes to Atari's *Pit-Fighter*. But by employing five actors with a background in martial arts, *Mortal Kombat*'s on-screen fighters came to life like never before. "I knew Danny Pesina [Johnny Cage, Scorpion, Sub-Zero], Carlos Pesina [Raiden], and Richard Divizio [Kano] through a mutual friend since our high school days," says Tobias. "Danny was a very talented Wushu practitioner and was friends with Ho-Sung Pak [Liu Kang, Shang Tsung], who I believe was a Wushu Grand Nationals champion. We were also looking for an athletic blonde actress and Danny brought Elizabeth Malecki [Sonya Blade] in, who was a co-worker of his at a local health club."



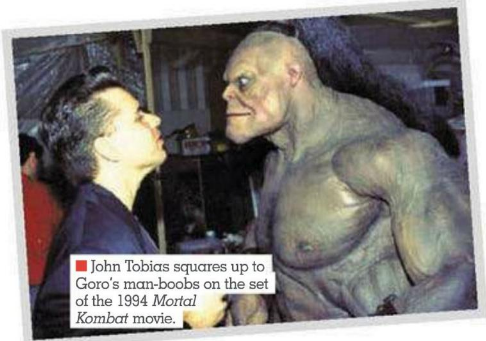
■ "Ed played the most so he was probably the best," Tobias admits. "I think I won the most with either Sub-Zero or Scorpion."

digitised form. Curt Chiarelli was the talented sculptor who brought Goro to life. I knew him through a mutual friend and he did a great job for us."

But as punishingly hard as the four-armed Shokan warrior was, the most vexing opponent in *Mortal Kombat* was undoubtedly Reptile – as you had to perform a Double Flawless Victory on The Pit stage before you could face him. "The hidden character idea originated with Ed," recalls Tobias when asked about the first secret character in a fighting game. "He loved fucking with the players that way. I remember thinking there was no way they were going to find all this stuff, but they found every bit of it. We were amazed because when you look at the circumstances the odds were just incredible."

And then, of course, there's the little matter of a soul-sucking sorcerer who could morph into every other character when you faced him in the final showdown. "I recently dug up one of my old notebooks and found a page that had archetypes attached to certain characters," Tobias describes while showing us some original sketches. "Shang Tsung was listed as 'shape-shifter'. We had memory issues and couldn't fit another epic boss in after Goro, so the idea of using all of the characters, which were already in memory, worked out great for us. Shang had a very limited set of animations that were mostly devoted to morphing between characters." Still, at least he couldn't regenerate his health.

Although *Mortal Kombat* was developed at a time when *Street Fighter II* and *Fatal Fury* were already relieving arcade patrons of their loose change, Ed Boon designed a fighting system that was considerably different to the competition. For a start, all the characters shared the same movement speed, damage output and repertoire of standard attacks, with only signature moves like Sub-Zero's Ice Freeze projectile and Johnny Cage's ball-busting Split Punch separating them offensively. It was also the first fighting game to feature a dedicated block button and special moves – like Raiden's Torpedo dive – that used motion-only inputs.



■ Every character has two or three special moves, which cover projectiles like Sub-Zero's Ice Freeze and instant punishers like Raiden's Torpedo. Our favourite, however, has to be Sonya's blockbusting Leg Grab.

■ John Tobias squares up to Goro's man-boobs on the set of the 1994 *Mortal Kombat* movie.

BUT ACCORDING TO Tobias, the five-button layout wasn't something they had in place from the start. "As I recall," Tobias says, "very early in development we had six punch and kick buttons – high, middle, and low. But we cut the middle button out because it was kind of redundant, and also because it helped us cut out some frames of animation that would've been required because of it." This was a sensible decision given the tight timeframe the team had to work with, but we can't help but wonder what a six-button *Mortal Kombat* might've played like.

Arranging the buttons in a cross pattern isn't the limit of *Mortal Kombat*'s innovations either, as similarly to how *Street Fighter II* inadvertently created the combo system, Boon and Tobias pretty much paved the way for *Tekken* by inventing the concept of juggles. "I recall juggling happening by accident," Tobias explains. "But once it was discovered, Ed took advantage of it and tweaked it from that point forward. It was purely his brainchild." It also had the unfortunate consequence of unbalancing the game, as certain juggle combos could kill a character at full health.

EARLY IN DEVELOPMENT WE HAD SIX PUNCH AND KICK BUTTONS – HIGH, MIDDLE AND LOW

Fortunately, these touch-of-death combos were mitigated with subsequent revisions that tweaked various aspects of the game before *Mortal Kombat II* was completed. Reptile, for instance, was added in Version 3, while players were only able to play against the same character from Version 2 onwards. The Test Your Might board breaking, meanwhile, was a permanent fixture from Version 0.9 on. "I'd worked on a similar minigame in *Total Carnage* where the player had to repeatedly whack a button to survive an electric chair," Tobias enthuses. "The one in *Street Fighter* served the same kind of purpose, which was just to give the player a break from the one-on-one battles. We wisely cut these sequences in the later games."

One thing that's never been cut from any *Mortal Kombat* to date, however, is the barbaric Fatality executions. The original wasn't the first fighting game to have coups de grâce – that honour goes to

>. A GAMING EVOLUTION

Street Fighter II > Mortal Kombat > Thrill Kill



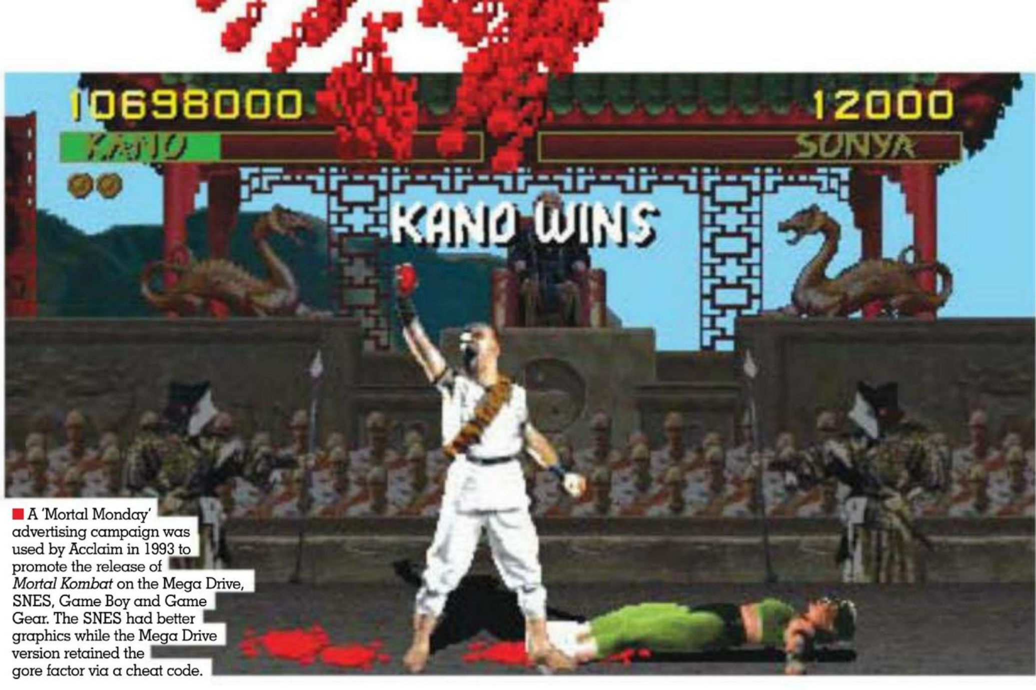
Like most fighting games released in the Nineties, *Mortal Kombat* owes a debt to *Street Fighter II* for paving the road ahead of it.



Thrill Kill tried to out-do *Mortal Kombat* in the violence stakes. It never saw release, but its engine was used to make *Wu-Tang: Taste The Pain*.







■ A 'Mortal Monday' advertising campaign was used by Acclaim in 1993 to promote the release of *Mortal Kombat* on the Mega Drive, SNES, Game Boy and Game Gear. The SNES had better graphics while the Mega Drive version retained the gore factor via a cheat code.

Barbarian on Commodore 64 – but while *Barbarian* was content with straight-up decapitations, *Mortal Kombat* featured invasive heart surgery and spine splitters. "There was this anticlimactic moment at the end of a match that just felt like something was missing," Tobias explains when asked about the origin of the iconic death blows. "That's where the idea started. We never really censored ourselves, we just thought about how to get positive reactions out of the player."

■■■ IN THIS SENSE, the Fatality system succeeded, as no match was truly finished unless the winning player despatched their opponent in over-the-top fashion. But after various hearings on 'videogame violence and the corruption of society' – headed up by US Senator Joseph Lieberman after the release of *Mortal Kombat* and *Night Trap* – the ESRB was established in 1994. "When we designed the original arcade product, I believe our demographic was players in their late teens or early twenties," Tobias states of the ensuing controversy. "We never thought of our players as children. I think that changed when the games were ported to the home consoles, and so I believe the rating system was entirely appropriate."

It's clear that the team's primary focus was to make a fun and memorable fighting game that didn't take itself too seriously, and by all accounts *Mortal Kombat* was exactly that. Tobias even used has experience working for the now defunct NOW Comics and Eternity Comics to write and illustrate a *Mortal Kombat: Collector's Edition* comic book that was advertised during the arcade game's attract mode for $3 by mail-order. "The comic was my idea and it came from this desire to tell a story, which couldn't be told in the game itself," he says with a smile. "I believe we sold at least a few thousand of them."

Tobias left Midway in 1999 during the development of *Mortal Kombat: Special Forces* and now does industry consulting work. He also illustrated a 16-page comic book that was included with the Kollector's Edition of *Mortal Kombat Vs. DC Universe*. "I like how they've altered the original character designs in both *DC Universe* and *Mortal Kombat 9*," Tobias reflects when asked about the recent reboot. "I think they really turned a corner in terms of quality and staying true to the original designs. When redesigning is done for no reason other than change for change's sake, you can lose the qualities which made a character special from its inception."

This is a sentiment that sums up *Mortal Kombat* really well; regardless of where the sequels have taken the series over the years, the original still holds up as one of the most compelling fighting games of its generation. And although everyone remembers it for the haunting words of 'Finish Him!!', underneath all the buckets of blood is a game full of intrigue and mystery. "One of the most interesting things that nobody else knows is what Raiden and Liu Kang are really shouting during their attacks," Tobias teases, "but I can't tell you what those are." So even with its 20th anniversary rapidly approaching, it seems *Mortal Kombat* still harbours some sordid secrets.

CENTRE STAGE

■ *MORTAL KOMBAT* featured six memorable stages that included the Warrior Shrine with its row of statues; the Throne Room where Shang Tsung watched from his lofty perch; the Courtyard where *Mortal Kombat* background designer John Vogel provided the animations for the masked guards; and the infamous Pit that let you pull off a Stage Fatality with a crafty uppercut that plunged the opponent onto the spikes below. The bottom of the Pit even doubled up as a secret seventh stage where you could fight the elusive Reptile.

"The inspirations for the backgrounds simply drew from the setting of a tournament on a mystical island," Tobias remembers. "Most of our memory was allocated for the characters and their animations so we did what we could with the backgrounds. Some of them were created using pieces of others. I don't think there were any concepts that were left undone." Then as the series progressed, we got to see everything from pools of acid to man-eating trees.





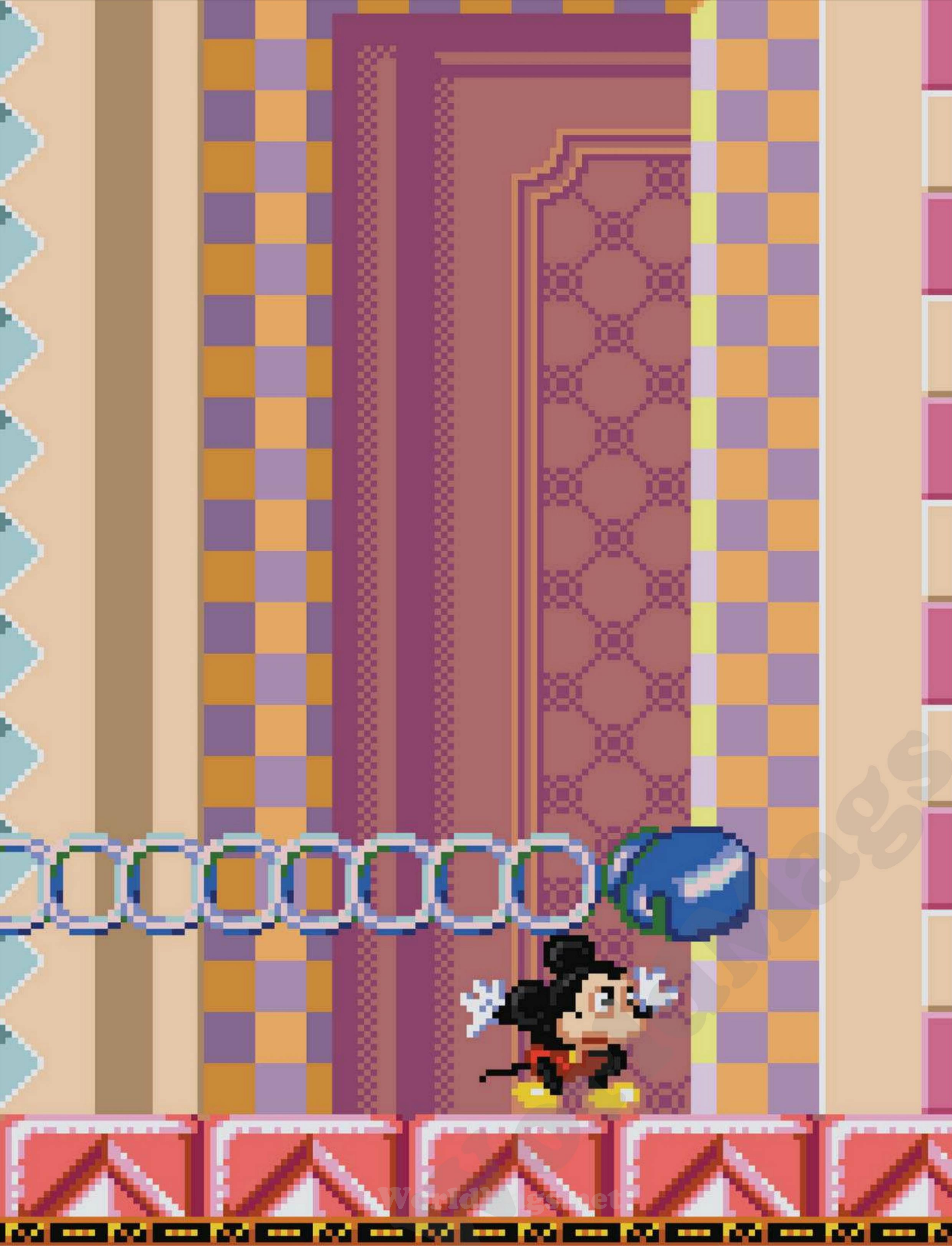
■ Play through the single-player and you can Test Your Might against blocks of wood, stone and steel. But only by competing against other players will you get to see ruby and diamond.



BEST BOSS

CASTLE OF ILLUSION STARRING MICKEY MOUSE [Sega] 1990

■ *CASTLE OF Illusion*'s Toyland stage lives on vibrantly in the mind of many a gamer. Bright colours, a jolly tune and a variety of friendly-looking wooden soldiers to bum-bounce into submission made for an easy-going playthrough in an engaging Disney locale. But everything changed when Mickey was dropped into the boss room. The backdrop turned headache-inducing and the music became a psychedelic synth nightmare to introduce this hideous clown-cum-birthday-present mutant. With a fixed grin and oversized shoes, the living box leapt around the screen on spring heels, stopping only to try and smash the terrified mouse with a room-spanning extendable boxing glove. While killing it was a simple matter of pattern learning, utilising the springs it would carelessly throw around the screen to jump up and bop it in the head, the clown's real power was the simple, unwavering ability to terrify young minds.



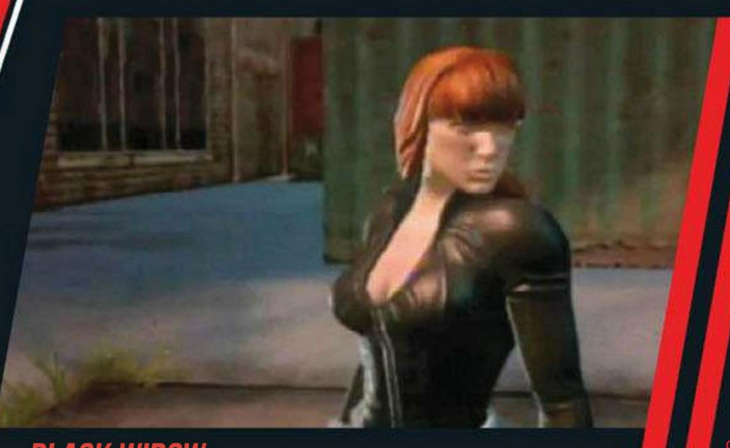


HAWKEYE BEST GAME: ULTIMATE MARVEL VS. CAPCOM 3 • PS3/360/VITA • 2011

■ JUST A bloke with a bow and arrow? Hardly. If you've seen the *Avengers* movie then you already know that Hawkeye can use a bow and arrow in such awesome ways that he can stand shoulder-to-shoulder with demigods, time-displaced super soldiers and mutated angry men and still hold his own. Sadly, he doesn't have his own game, but has appeared alongside tons of other videogame superheroes over the years. In fact, if you include cameos, Hawkeye has appeared in more games than most other Avengers. He's a playable character in Sega's 1991 *Spider-Man* coin-op, in *Captain America And The Avengers*, in the PSP edition of *Marvel Ultimate Alliance* and in kids' MMO *Marvel Superhero Squad Online*, and is a support character in *Venom/Spider-Man: Separation Anxiety*. His best appearance, however, is in the awesome *Ultimate Marvel Vs. Capcom 3.* Capcom's fighting game wins by default for being awesome, but it also happens to be the best realisation of Hawkeye to date, with tons of different arrow types to use and an amazing level 3 super move that sees Ant Man ride Hawkeye's arrow before transforming into Giant Man for a final devastating stomp. How cool. Incidentally, *Ultimate Marvel Vs. Capcom 3* features five of the seven heroes to star in the team's cinema outing. So maybe it's the best *Avengers* game overall.

SEEN THE AVENGERS MOVIE AND DISAPPOINTED THAT THERE'S NO OFFICIAL VIDEOGAME UNTIL UBISOFT RELEASES ITS SURE-TO-BE-POOR KINECT TIE-IN THIS CHRISTMAS? FEAR NOT: THERE ARE LOADS OF GAMES STARRING THE INDIVIDUAL MEMBERS OF THE AVENGERS ALREADY. ALLOW GAMES™ TO SELECT THE BEST...

AVENGERS GAM



BLACK WIDOW BEST GAME: MARVEL ULTIMATE ALLIANCE • PSP • 2006

■ UNSURPRISINGLY, SHIELD'S femme fatale super-spy has been neglected by videogames in the past, though we'd expect to see that change in the next decade if Scarlett Johansson's kickass performance in the recent *Avengers* movie nets her the spin-off film she deserves. Black Widow has made a couple of cameo appearances so far; she crops up in the 2005 adaptation of the *Punisher* movie and features as a boss in *Marvel Ultimate Alliance 2*, while her only playable appearance is in the PSP version of the first, and sadly average, *Marvel Utimate Alliance*. Black Widow, your videogame limelight still beckons.

NICK FURY BEST GAME: THE PUNISHER • ARCADE/MEGA DRIVE • 1993

■ NOT STRICTLY an Avenger, you say? Look Nick Fury in his eye and say that. He's been played by two Hollywood badasses, Samuel L Jackson and David Hasselhoff. He fought in WWII, the Korean War and Vietnam. And even with no superpowers and only one eye, he could still have your dad. So he deserves a game as much as any of the actual Avengers, goddammit! But he doesn't get one. Like Hawkeye and Black Widow, he's under-represented. But he has earned playable or cameo appearances in nearly 15 videogames to date. In most of his appearances, as in the films, Fury is a mostly passive character, giving orders but rarely getting his hands dirty. His most prominent playable appearance is 1993's arcade/ Mega Drive side-scroller *The Punisher*, in which Fury is controlled by the second player. Playing a lot like *Final Fight*, Capcom's game sees Fury punch, shoot, throw, swing lead pipes and even perform Mike Haggar-style spinning lariats on every criminal he encounters, and he does all this while continually smoking a cigar. Nope, we wouldn't mess with him either.



THOR BEST GAME: THOR: GOD OF THUNDER • DS • 2011

■ ASIDE FROM a 1988 Spectrum/MSX game that looks like it could have been any game at all despite its licence (and may not be official now that we think about it), the Mighty Thor has had only one proper videogame – Sega's movie-licensed action adventure from 2011. Forget the console editions, though; it's the little-known DS game that makes best use of Thor. Made by the 2D masters at Wayforward Technologies (*Contra 4*, *Shantae*), DS's *Thor: God Of Thunder* is an excellent side-scrolling brawler that has a surprisingly flexible combat system, including *DMC*-style mid-air attacks and some of the best 2D sprite work we've seen on the system.

CAPTAIN AMERICA BEST GAME: CAPTAIN AMERICA: SUPER SOLDIER • PS3/360 • 2011

■ AS MARVEL'S first comic book superhero, Captain America was also one of the first to get his own videogames, but early adaptations were far from decent. Both *Captain America In The Doom Tube Of Dr Megalomann* and *Spider-Man And Captain America: Dr Doom's Revenge* were sub-par home computer games that recreated the Cap in sprite form but did little to capture his spirit. 1991's *Captain America And The Avengers* was at least a fairly decent scrolling fighter, but the best Steve Rogers game is definitely his latest, Sega's *Captain America: Super Soldier*. Though not a perfect game by any means, *Super Soldier* combines the proven structure of *Batman: Arkham Asylum* with an *Assassin's Creed*-style platform mechanic. Cap moves so fast that bullets can't touch him – and then there's his vibranium shield, capable of targeting multiple foes at once before returning right back to his hands, Batarang-style.



ES ASSEMBLED



IRON MAN BEST GAME: THE INVINCIBLE IRON MAN • GBA • 2002

■ POOR TONY Stark; no wonder he has a habit of hitting the bottle. We'd do the same if our first videogame was *Iron Man And X-O Manowar In Heavy Metal*. This mid-Nineties PSone/Saturn game is generally regarded as one of the worst games ever made. It's a mindless, repetitive blaster in which you basically need only crouch and shoot to win. Have a look at the video on **gamestm.co.uk** to see how utterly boring it is. Sega's recent movie-based efforts fared little better. Like a cross between *Ace Combat* and *Armored Core*, they had the potential to be good but a general lack of imagination and polish leaves them feeling under-developed and just plain dull. To identify a 'best' *Iron Man* game still shouldn't be considered a recommendation, but if you're going to play one then have a go on *The Invincible Iron Man*. Though it's nothing special, this Game Boy Advance title combines elements from the likes of *Mega Man* and *Shinobi* in a way that should prove absorbing for most retro fans.

HULK BEST GAME: THE INCREDIBLE HULK • MEGA DRIVE/SNES • 1994

■ HULK IS the best thing in *The Avengers* (disagree and we'll smash you), so it's fitting that he has the best games. Radical Entertainment (developer of the very similar *Prototype* series) cut its teeth on the movie-based *Hulk* game and its superior sequel, *Hulk: Ultimate Destruction*, and did a fantastic job of making players feel in control of a gleefully powerful goliath, capable of just about any physical feat. Even the early games are great – Scott Adams made a fantastic *Hulk* text adventure as part of the *Questprobe* series in 1984, but our pick of the bunch is Probe's 16-bit side-scroller, *The Incredible Hulk*. Why? It's the one game that best makes use of the contrast between the Hulk and his weedy alter ego, Bruce Banner. Certain parts of the level design require Hulk to return to human form in order for him to proceed, but this also makes him much more vulnerable to attack, which adds some much-needed risk to a character that's otherwise all-powerful.



1988 1989 1990 1991

THE COMPLETE HI





■ Considered by most to be the pinnacle of the series, *King's Quest VI* came as the golden age of computer adventures was at its peak.

WITH THREE major 16-bit systems now on the market, two unique portables, and a couple of high-end machines on the sidelines with SNK's Neo-Geo and the multimedia-focused CD-i – not to mention several home computer standards battling for market dominance – 1992 looks a whole lot like 1982 did with the advantage of hindsight.

Gamers indeed had a lot of products to choose from, but unlike the first time around, the market was healthy. There would be no crash this time. True, some companies suffered while others thrived, but for the most part videogames had proven themselves to critics by 1992. They were here to stay, and with the new CD-ROM era now an obvious eventuality, it was an exciting time to be a gamer.

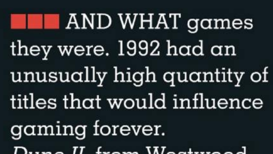
1992 was a transitional year. There were no major hardware developments: Nintendo continued to promise a Super Nintendo CD-ROM attachment, Atari promised a new 64-bit system to mostly deaf ears, and rumours circulated about an even more powerful CD system coming out the following year, but other than that, there wasn't anything terribly new on the horizon to look forward to. Without worrying that Nintendo or Sega might surprise them with a new system, gamers were free to purchase games for their libraries without worry.

YEAR IN 19

AND WHAT games they were. 1992 had an unusually high quantity of titles that would influence gaming forever. *Dune II*, from Westwood, established the now-standard framework for every real-time strategy game that would come later. While not technically the first RTS, *Dune II* introduced such staples as resource mining and the idea of warring factions with unique properties. *Warcraft*, *Starcraft* and Westwood's own *Command & Conquer* took heavy inspiration from this game.

Similarly, *Wolfenstein 3D* might not technically have been the first game that involved players shooting a weapon while looking through the eyes of a game's







■ Mario went a bit off the beaten path in 1992. In addition to teaching typing, he also helped players paint and went missing in an educational adventure.

STORY OF GAMES

protagonist, but it remains *the* seminal first-person shooter. The game foregoes just about any concept that does not directly involve running and gunning, and it does so in a 3D engine that looked like it came from another planet back in 1992.

Wolfenstein 3D wasn't the only first-person 3D game to debut that year. *Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss* from Blue Sky Productions (later known as Looking Glass Studios, creators of *System Shock* and *Thief*) also employed a first-person view to great effect, and was the first action-RPG to attempt such a viewpoint. Unlike *Wolfenstein*, *The Stygian Abyss* also enabled players to look up and down!

Alone In The Dark, a period piece set in a haunted mansion in 1924, was the very first 3D survival-horror game. The game forced players to run and hide; while it had combat mechanics, players often found that they just weren't strong enough to stand and fight. That might not seem like much in our post-*Amnesia* era, but back then the concept was unique. Players had to force their brains to think about games in an entirely new way.

Super Mario Kart debuted in 1992, the first in Nintendo's long-running *Mario Kart* series. Racing games had been around since more or less the dawn of videogames, of course, but *Super Mario Kart* was in many ways the first to turn racing into an living room pastime for the entire family. It was Nintendo's first party game, six years before *Mario Party*.

REVIEW 92

In the arcades, *Virtua Racing* made players fall in love with polygons. There were 3D-modelled games before it, but at the time *Virtua Racing* blew them all away in terms of detail and performance. Though primitive by today's standards, seeing a road zip by that seemed to actually be made of solid matter immersed players like never before.

■■■ We'd be remiss not to mention *Sonic The Hedgehog 2*, considered by many to be Sonic's finest hour. Sega's strategy of packing in the original *Sonic* with the Mega Drive in 1991 was a success, as for the first time Nintendo's was not the dominant system in the United States during the holiday season. With the idea's success proven, Sega was able to justify the cost of making a wide-reaching sequel that expanded upon the successes of the original.

Sega also introduced *Ecco The Dolphin*, a game that two decades later still hasn't been replicated. Players took control of a dolphin, exploring the often terrorizing and claustrophobic depths of the ocean, before jumping the shark like all good dolphins, and sending the player through time before facing off against a huge alien being.

And finally, 1992 was the year that introduced Midway's answer to *Street Fighter II*: a 'photorealistic' fighting game called *Mortal Kombat*. But we've written far too much about that this month already…



■ *Sonic The Hedgehog 2* expanded on the success of the original by offering bigger worlds, tighter designs, and a new two-tailed companion.

■ The original *Championship Manager* made its debut. The series continues today, though the original wasn't very good…

DEVELOPER of the YEAR
Frédérick Raynal

■ Though he'd been putting out games since the early 1980s, French game designer Frédérick Raynal's best-known game, *Alone In The Dark*, debuted in 1992. Raynal combined his love of horror films and his intuition that 3D games were the future, and combined these interests into what was at the time a completely unique experience: a 3D game which tasked the player with simply surviving the horrors around him (or her: players had an option when the game began). Raynal followed up *Alone In The Dark* with cult classic *Little Big Adventure*, and co-created the *Toy Commander* series.



EXTENDED PLAY: **1992**

SHINING FORCE

Each month we select one of the most interesting or important games from our year in review…. This month, Sega gets strategic

BY 1992 the traditional JRPG had long been established by the likes of *Final Fantasy* and *Dragon Warrior*, but the strategy RPG? That was something new. Sure, Japan had *Fire Emblem*, but Nintendo's tactical wonder wouldn't reach the West until its 2003 GBA incarnation. As far as we were concerned, it was Sega's *Shining Force* that heralded a new way to role-play. *Shining Force* players didn't take control of a single warrior or even a handful, as in other RPGs; they controlled an entire army made up of individual warriors with their own unique appearance, characteristics and abilities.

A total of 30 characters could be recruited into the 'Shining Force', many of them secret characters to be discovered through some special means, but the player could only take 12 of those characters into battle at any one time. This added a layer of personalisation on a grander scale than most RPGs, enabling customisation of an entire group. This has since become a key component of the SRPG sub-genre, of course, but *Shining Force* remains one of the best examples of the genre thanks to its mixture of relatable characters, unique races and quirky special troops. With regular human warriors complemented by wolflings, centaurs, ninja, dragons, robots, bird knights and er, a weird gopher thing, choosing a favourite Force to battle with is hardly easy.

ADDED A LAYER OF PERSONALISATION ON A GRANDER SCALE THAN MOST RPGS

Shining Force was the brainchild of two brothers, Shugo and Hiroyuki Takahashi, who'd previously worked at Enix on the *Dragon Quest* series but wanted to make something with much more enjoyable battles. Their first game at Sega, *Shining In The Darkness*, basically replicated the format of *DQ* in a first-person dungeon-crawling context, but *Shining Force* shook things up. Its top-down view enabled characters to be moved around independently of each other, making the battlefield itself as much of an asset as a sword or magic wand. Level design was key to the game's brilliance, and the brothers did a great job of creating maps with enough choke points, defensive camps and vulnerable open spaces to get the player to form a plan of attack before embarking across the terrain.

With none of the JRPG genre's random battles, *Shining Force*'s structure was more a series of pre-determined conflicts arranged into chapters. It avoided the frustration of grinding and was more satisfying as a result. Methodically clearing a battlefield of engaging enemies trumps a thousand fights with a thousand slimes any day.



The unique mixture of races forms part of the world view that links different gameplay genres throughout the *Shining* series.



The original *Shining Force* is now available on iPhone for just 69p, which is a bargain that's far too good to pass up.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?



■ THE *SHINING* series really took off after *Shining Force*, and branched into a number of other RPG sub-genres such as *Zelda*-style in *Shining Wisdom* or more dungeon crawling in *Shining The Holy Ark*, but it was the tactical style that remained the most popular, culminating in the ambitious multi-disc epic that was Saturn's *Shining Force III*. Sadly, the series fell into mediocrity from there as the Takahashi brothers parted ways with Sega. *Shining Soul* and its sequel were nice little *Diablo*-style hack-and-slash games, but annoyed fans with their abuse of the canon, while the likes of *Shining Tears* and *Wind* devalued the brand with their quasi-hentai art style. Only *Shining Force Feather* and this year's *Shining Blade* have made any attempt to recapture the *Shining Force* spirit, but in the SRPG stakes Sega's crown has long since been claimed by successors like *Disgaea* and *Final Fantasy Tactics*.



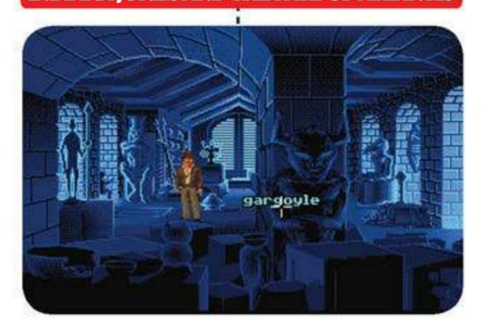
ALSO RELEASED THIS YEAR...

WOLFENSTEIN 3D



■ 1992 WAS a year for genre firsts, not least because this was the year id Software defined the first-person shooter with Nazi blaster *Wolfenstein 3D*. One year from *Doom*, this was either the beginning of the end or the end of the beginning depending on your view of videogames.

INDIANA JONES AND THE FATE OF ATLANTIS



■ FIRST-PERSON shooters would later be blamed for the death of the adventure genre, but in 1992 it was still going strong. *Fate Of Atlantis* was a landmark release for LucasArts, thanks to its innovative voice acting and a non-linear plot which reacted to the player's own actions.

NIGHT TRAP



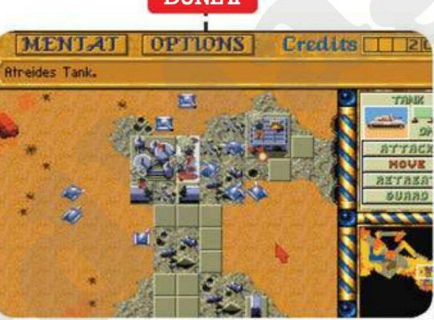
■ AS THE CD-ROM revolution took hold, it was only natural that the FMV boom would bring titillating material like this slumber party gone wrong. *Night Trap* is most famous for the media and courtroom controversy it caused but, in reality, it's actually a pretty dull game of trial and error.

ALONE IN THE DARK



■ THE TERM 'survival-horror' may have been coined with *Resident Evil*, but the genre began to take shape four years earlier with this haunted house game inspired by Poe and Lovecraft. Ahead of its time, *Alone In The Dark* combined puzzles, combat and exploration in a way that would become standard for the emerging 3D medium.

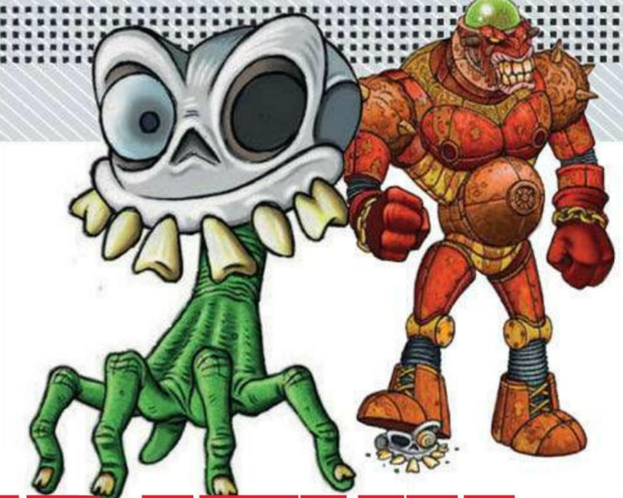
DUNE II



■ ANOTHER FIRST – strangely found in a sequel – was this licensed game for Amiga and PC, which turned resource gathering and large-scale conflict into a genre all its own: the real-time strategy. The architect of this new genre was Westwood Studios, which would go on to make the mighty *Command & Conquer*.

COLLECTOR'S CORNER

Your monthly guide to collectable retro treasures



MEDIEVIL 2

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation
YEAR: 2000
PUBLISHER: SCEE
DEVELOPER: SCE Studio Cambridge
EXPECT TO PAY: £120+

If you'd like games™ to feature you and your prized possession in Collector's Corner, email us at retro@imagine-publishing.co.uk



EXHIBIT A: Certainly one of the most distinguished PlayStation press kits, the game comes packaged in this impressive book, which calls to mind the Necronomicon, only it isn't bound in human skin.



EXHIBIT B: Inside the book are two discs – one containing the game and another that features a selection of hi-res game artwork, press assets and screenshots.



EXHIBIT C: To tie in with the book theme of this press kit, inside is a series of pages featuring some nice artwork and details about the key features in the game.

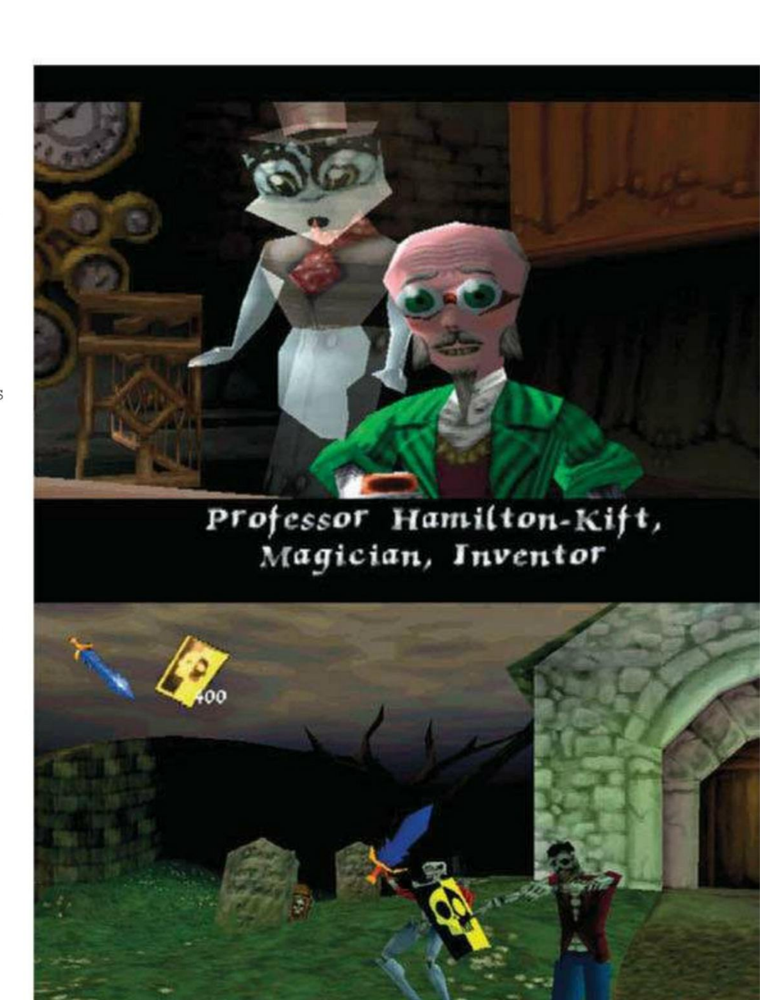
Why It's Rare

MOST VINTAGE press kits are becoming increasingly rare. Produced in limited numbers, distributed mostly among the gaming press, or often used as competition prizes, many become forgotten about, discovered incomplete or lost to office clearouts as a result of journalists not realising they could become collectable in years to come.

Released a couple of years after *Crash Bandicoot*, *Tomb Raider* and *Mario 64* made a profound impact on gamers, *MediEvil* arrived at a time when the 3D action-platformer was very popular, and as such became something of a sleeper hit both in Europe and the US when it arrived just in time for Halloween 1998.

Despite carving out a decent fan base and being a fine follow-up, the sequel made less of an impact, and again this was most likely due to timing. Released in 2000, it came out the same year Sony released the PlayStation 2.

Though this particular press kit is light on collectable gifts in contrast to others we've featured in the past, its Gothic book design does make it a unique example, and highly desirable for many collectors. That *MediEvil* has also become something of a cult PlayStation series since its original release has also helped to boost both its value and appeal.



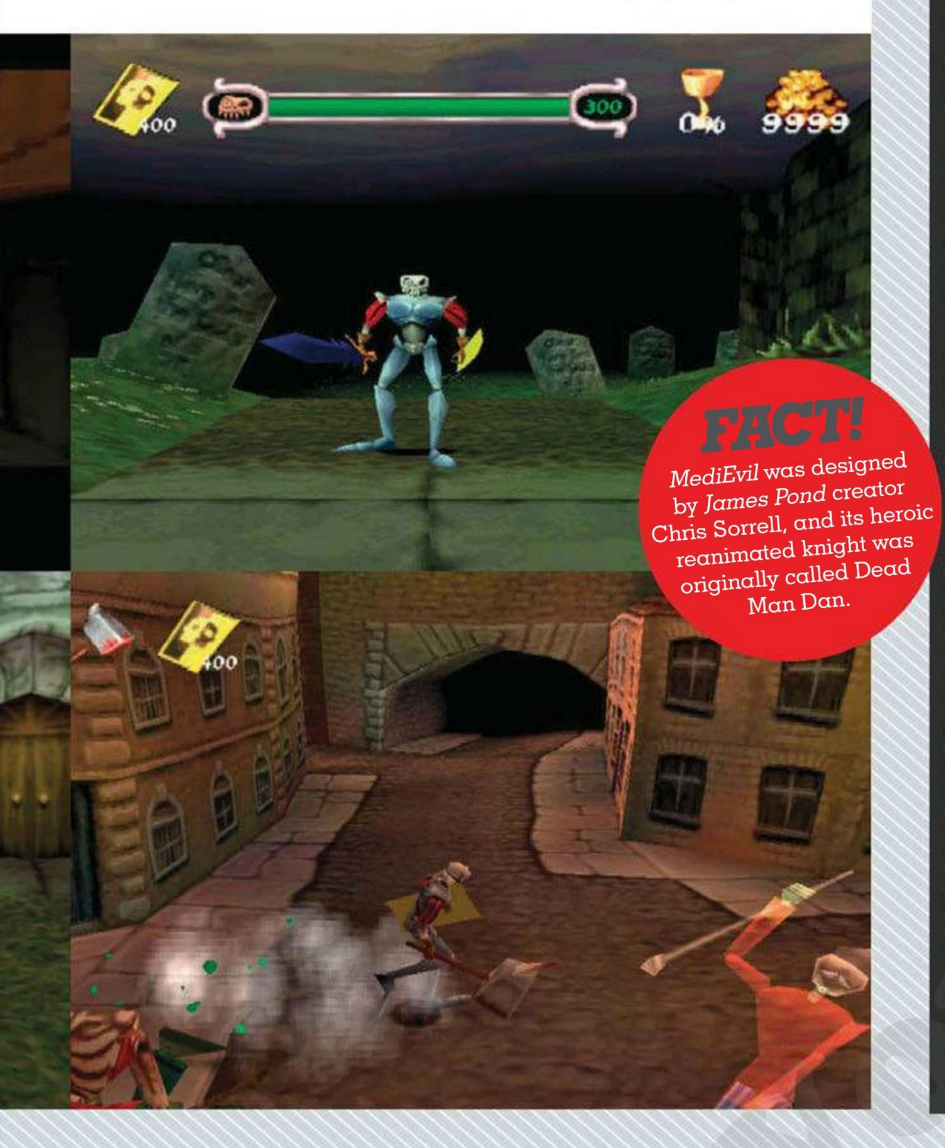
Worth Playing?

MEDIEVIL AND its sequel are fun and amusing 3D hack-and-slash adventures. The series works so well by mixing together the explorative puzzle gameplay of *Tomb Raider* with the knights-and-monsters theme and fast-paced arcade action of Capcom's classic *Ghosts'n Goblins*.

MediEvil 2 messed little with the formula, but did introduce a number of new ideas to expand upon it. As well as adding new weapons and enemies for undead hero Sir Daniel Fortesque to biff, it moved the setting from eerie Gothic graveyards and medieval castles to the cobbled streets of Victorian London.

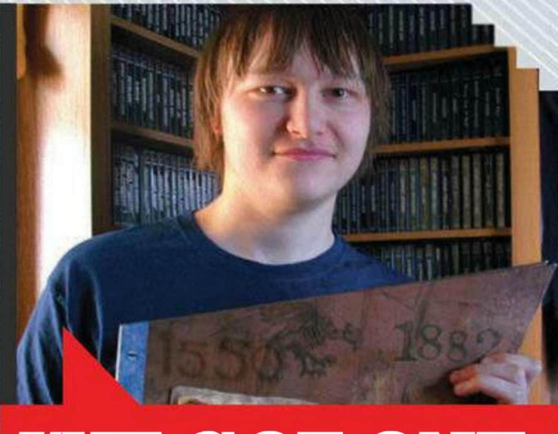
An interesting new gameplay feature also enabled control of Dan's disembodied head and headless body at various points during the adventure, something that's put to good effect in a number of puzzles, as well as an interesting boxing minigame in one of the levels.

MediEvil is a fun and underappreciated PlayStation game, and the sequel upholds its quality while at the same time brings enough new ideas to the table to keep it feeling fresh. Unfortunately it hasn't aged all that well, but it nonetheless remains a collector's item that's also worth a playthrough.



FACT!

MediEvil was designed by *James Pond* creator Chris Sorrell, and its heroic reanimated knight was originally called Dead Man Dan.



I'VE GOT ONE

Name: **Rob Wass**
Occupation: **Marketing/Art Executive**

What is it about the PlayStation, and *MediEvil 2* in particular, that is attractive to you?
PlayStation was the console I grew up with. It had a huge impact on the world and to me personally. Despite being young at the time, I still remember the joy of queuing up to rent the latest PSone titles. *MediEvil* was the first PSone game I ever played. *MediEvil 2* was just as good as the first, and the art style is so appealing to me.

Please tell us how/where you found the game.
I'm an administrator over at playstationcollecting.com, and the owner, Xed, runs a retro gaming shop on eBay. He got the press kit into his shop and let me have first dibs, knowing how huge a fan I am of the series. So really he did the hard work!

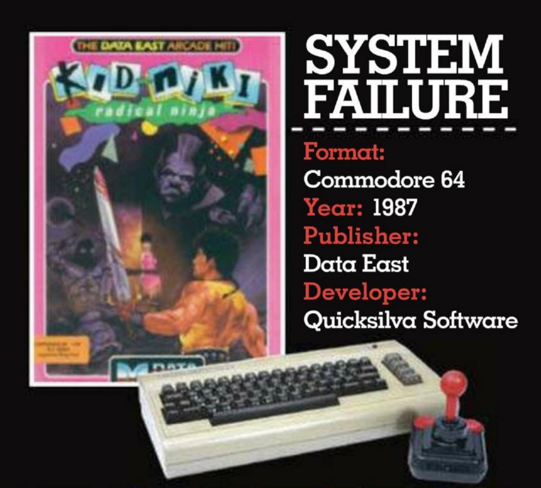
What condition was the game in and how much did you pay for it?
The press kit was in near-perfect condition; there was some slight creasing to the box edge as it's thin card, but damn good for something that's 12 years old. It cost me £120, which is at the lower end of what they normally cost when they do surface.

Do you actually play *MediEvil 2* and, if so, what do you think of it?
Yes! Of course. I play it from start to 100 per cent completion at least once a year, if not more. *MediEvil* is my favourite series to this day, and it's a real shame there was never a *MediEvil 3*. Games really aren't made like this any more. In fact, *MediEvil* is part of the inspiration for my own indie game that is currently in development called *Clive And The Stones Of The Ancient Bunnies*!

Finally, would you ever consider selling the game or is it yours for life?
No, never! It represents my childhood, and even just seeing it sitting on the shelf every evening when I get home from work puts a smile on my face. That's worth more than money to me.

CONVERSION CATASTROPHE

The world's most embarrassing console ports, under the spotlight.



SYSTEM FAILURE

Format: Commodore 64
Year: 1987
Publisher: Data East
Developer: Quicksilva Software

KID NIKI: RADICAL NINJA

ORIGINAL RELEASE Board: Irem M62 **Year:** 1986 **Publisher:** Irem **Developer:** In-house

IT'S SURPRISING that *Kid Niki* wasn't more popular in his day. After all, ninja-themed videogames were all the rage in the Eighties and *Kid Niki: Radical Ninja* had the advantage of its titular cartoon hero, zany humour and platforming stages appealing to younger gamers. However, the original arcade game only garnered a modest amount of popularity in the West, and this was boosted by a decent NES conversion. In fact, the game was better received in Japan, where it spawned three sequels.

As well as appearing on the NES, *Kid Niki* also graced two other popular US machines: the Apple II and Commodore 64. Published by Data East, both 8-bit computer ports look very similar and were disappointing conversions. Comparing the two, the Commodore 64 version is by far the worst, and has now become a port of deserved infamy among the C64 fraternity.

Developed by Quicksilva Software (the same developer responsible for famously awful US version of *Ikari Warriors*), *Kid Niki* raises the bar for catastrophic C64 arcade conversions. With its brain-hurtingly ugly visuals, irritating sound effects, lack of music, plodding gameplay and frustrating controls, it has none of the qualities that made the arcade game fun and appealing. It even manages to somehow get its own name wrong: calling itself *Kid Niki To The Rescue* on its title screen, despite the fact that the correct name is used on the box art.

While its level layouts and enemy locations are pretty faithful to the coin-op, graphically this port is a real shocker. A few missing colours and sprites away from looking more like *Stick Man's Ugly Adventure In Baby Scrawl Land*, this port is so ugly we're surprised that gazing upon it doesn't turn people to stone. The Kid Niki sprite looks like Jason Voorhees and the levels look like Ceefax.

Thankfully for us Brits, this disastrous port was only released in Canada and the US. A UK version for the C64 was planned but never put into production. The story goes that it would've been developed by The Sales Curve, but the UK software house decided to secure the licence for Tecmo's *Silkworm* instead. The irony is that it did a pretty good job in converting *Silkworm* to C64 and Amiga, so had fate taken a different course it's likely C64 owners could have ended up with a half-decent conversion *Kid Niki*.

HEAD TO HEAD



ARCADE



COMMODORE 64

THE BREAKDOWN

1 This conversion plays as bad as it looks. The controls are woolly and unresponsive, and the speed, scrolling and collision detection feel a bit off too. These problems are most noticeable during boss fights, which show off how bad the graphics really are.

2 It's clear that little thought was given to the visuals of this port. Sprites look messy and their colour schemes frequently clash with backgrounds. See if you can spot Niki doing a convincing ninja impression in this screenshot by showing off his chameleonic background fade powers.

3 This port also lacks any in-game music. Instead, your ears get to receive sonic abuse from irritating sound effects that get played whenever Niki jumps or uses his weapon. Unfortunately, these are two actions that occur a lot in a ninja-themed platform game. Goodness knows what the music would've sounded like.

WHAT YOU SHOULD HAVE PLAYED IT ON

Format: **NES** Year: **1987** Publisher: **Data East** Developer: **TOSE**



■ You're hardly spoilt for choice as *Kid Niki* was only ported to three systems. It's not all doom and gloom, however, as a superb NES/Famicom port more than makes up for the dire Apple II and C64 efforts. With colourful visuals and fun, jovial gameplay, it was the version to play.



The RETRO Guide To… BATMAN

As the Dark Knight prepares to take to the big screen yet again, games™ looks back at the Caped Crusader's classic videogame roles and speaks to some of the people involved with transferring his exploits from panels to pixels

EVER SINCE SPIDER-MAN and Superman first appeared on the Atari 2600, gamers have become obsessed with playing as their favourite comic book heroes. The vast majority of superhero games are actually pretty ropey, however, rarely living up to what they promise. And yet Batman, for the most part, has had a relatively strong videogame showing, and while he's still appeared in plenty of duffers – particularly during the transition to 3D gaming – he's been in far more successful games than any other costumed hero.

But what makes *Batman* a credible game licence? Jon Ritman, creator of the 1986 *Batman* game for Spectrum, has the answer. Ritman was looking for a suitable character for his new isometric game and decided to approach Ocean's Jon Woods about a potential *Batman* title. When Woods started singing the *Batman* theme tune to him, Ritman felt he was on to something. Woods chased the rights and Ritman started working on the game that would become a smash-hit for Ocean.

"The first *Batman* game was tied up before I joined Ocean, but without a doubt it opened the door for us to be first in line for subsequent ones," recalls Ocean's Gary Bracey about the securing of the licence. "The fact that we had a great relationship with Warner Bros. also didn't harm."

Ocean followed *Batman* up with two additional games before the popularity of the franchise saw bigger publishers, including Acclaim, Sega, Konami and Electronic Arts muscle in on the evergreen licence, with varying degrees of success. So why does Batman work so well as a videogame character when others fail? "I disagree with that fundamental concept," counters Bracey. "The reason Batman worked so well was that the games were well designed. I do believe that – given the appropriate creative force – any superhero game could be great. It's down to the design, not the character. You could say the same about the movies. Batman has worked incredibly well on the big screen – Joel Schumacher excepted. It's all about implementation and, I guess, passion. Look what Joss Whedon has done with *The Avengers*. He's a comic book geek and it shows in every frame of that brilliant movie. Rocksteady obviously held Batman in similarly high regard, and that shows in their games."

And yet it's not just Rocksteady that knows how to make genuinely great *Batman* games. Don't believe us? Then join us, as we examine the best and worst games to star Gotham's protector.

1986



BATMAN

Jon Ritman may have had the idea for the first *Batman* game, but it was Ultimate that indirectly helped shape it. Ritman had been amazed by Ultimate's Filmation technique in *Knight Lore* and wanted to make something similar for his next game. That game saw Batman exploring the labyrinthine Bat Cave in search of the seven missing pieces of the Bat Craft that would enable him to rescue Robin. It's a slick isometric adventure with an early example of checkpoints and the ability to pick up numerous items to aid Batman's search. Its only downside is that it shares little in common with the source material. And Batman is fat.

1988



BATMAN: THE CAPED CRUSADER

Ocean's second *Batman* game not only improved on Ritman's offering graphically, but also felt more like an actual Batman adventure. This was mainly down to splitting the game into two distinct adventures featuring the Penguin and the Joker, which pushed it closer to a representation of the original comics as opposed to a great game that Batman had been shoehorned into. Batman flung Batarangs, punched out enemies, mixed puzzles with fisticuffs and generally behaved just as you'd expect him to. The comic book feel was further heightened by all the action taking place within panels, which would overlay each other whenever Batman explored new locations.



1989 BATMAN: THE MOVIE

■■■OCEAN'S LAST *Batman* game was another doozy, an excellent title that mixed a cleverly designed platformer with some excellent driving sections. While the 8-bit versions were very impressive (particularly compared to many other film licences of the time) it was the 16-bit versions that really floored gamers' jaws, with the Amiga version being particularly impressive. Aside from its superb graphics and stunning samples from the movie, the side-on driving and flying sections were replaced by sensational 3D levels that gave an excellent illusion of speed, and which still manage to impress today. Interestingly, it was also one of the first examples of numerous developers working on the same core licence.





■ Ocean's final game earned rave reviews, and did particularly well on the Amiga, easily wowing early adopters of the machine.



1989 BATMAN

■■■WHILE OCEAN snared the many home computer versions of Tim Burton's *Batman*, Sunsoft secured the console outings. What's interesting here is that in addition to taking a different route to the Ocean titles, each game plays to the strengths of its system.

The NES version, for example, is a wonderfully slick little platformer that features excellent, well-animated sprites, gameplay reminiscent of both *Ninja Gaiden* and *Strider*, and a number of projectile weapons for Bats that make it play more like a run-and-gun title than a traditional platformer. The Game Boy effort also features heavy shooting elements, but it uses gloriously tiny sprites and completely different level design, making it feel more like the Game Boy's *Super Mario Land*.

The PC Engine offering is a top-down game, with Batman walking around corridors collecting power-ups and dispatching bad guys. It's not a bad game, and features a stunning soundtrack, but it pales next to its peers.

1990 BATMAN

■■■THE ARCADE game based on the movie was another different beast, this time by defunct developer Nu-Mega Technologies. It's a decent scrolling fighter with large sprites, but rather stilted animation and a limited move set. It also features pseudo 3D Batmobile and Batwing sections, in which you must shoot down incoming enemies. It's fun but lacks the impact of the console and computer versions.



■ The first-person driving sections elevated the arcade version of *Batman*'s movie tie-in above its home computer counterparts.

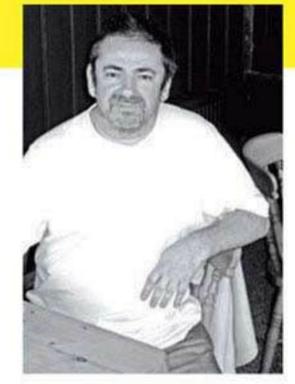


1991 BATMAN: RETURN OF THE JOKER

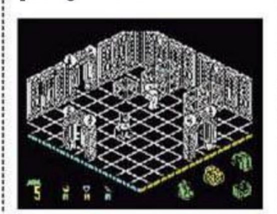
■■■AFTER THE success of its first few *Batman* games, Sunsoft once again found itself working with the DC licence. *Return Of The Joker* takes a more run-and-gun approach than Sunsoft's previous games, with the NES version in particular sharing numerous similarities with Konami's *Contra* (even some of the bosses are practically identical). The SNES outing is also very similar to its 8-bit brother, but boasts slicker scrolling, faster paced gameplay and an atmospheric soundtrack. The Mega Drive game, while similar in design, feels more sluggish than its counterparts, and is a step down from Sunsoft's original Mega Drive *Batman*. That leaves the Game Boy outing – and while it has little in common with its peers, it remains a better game thanks to Sunsoft's decision to make it more like its original NES *Batman* title, right down to the useful wall jump.

BEHIND THE SCENES: BATMAN

We speak to Jon Ritman about the game that started it all

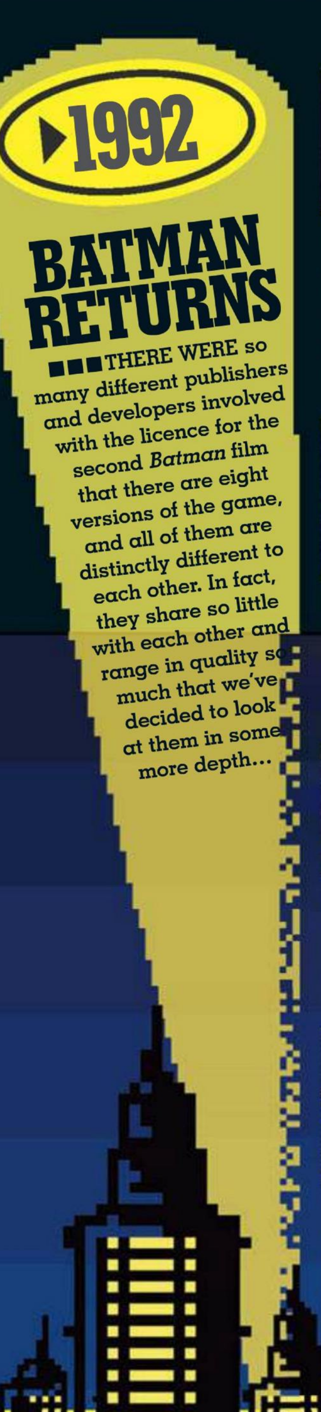


■ WHY DID you choose to make a videogame about Batman?
I had been trying to come up with a hero that people would recognise. I mentioned *Batman* and then dismissed it as it had been a long time since the Sixties series, and I assumed none of my likely buyers had ever seen it (being a little young). Bernie Drummond informed me that Channel 4 was rerunning the series in kids' TV time, so in fact I was completely wrong…



And why did you choose the isometric setting?
The isometric setting came before the character. I had just seen Ultimate's *Knight Lore* and been blown away by it; I knew I wanted to make a game using the isometric system.

How long did it take you to create *Batman*, from start to finish?
It's hard to remember now, but probably about a year.



1992

BATMAN RETURNS

■■■ THERE WERE so many different publishers and developers involved with the licence for the second *Batman* film that there are eight versions of the game, and all of them are distinctly different to each other. In fact, they share so little with each other and range in quality so much that we've decided to look at them in some more depth…



MASTER SYSTEM/ GAME GEAR: ■ This awful effort features horrific collision detection and a frustratingly unfair difficulty level. The inclusion of alternate routes is a nice touch, but the ropey gameplay, uninspired level design and garish visuals make it one to avoid.



ATARI LYNX: ■ Originally available as a pack-in with the redesigned Lynx, *Batman Returns* has slick visuals, solid tunes and wonderful cartoony visuals. Unfortunately, it's hampered by a high difficulty level that makes it a tough *Batman* game to love.



PC: ■ This is a rather interesting effort as it mixes average fighting with intriguing point-and-click scenes. The latter bits really bring Batman's detective side to the fore. It's just a pity the action sections are so weak.



MEGA-CD: ■ Although it includes the same core gameplay as the Mega Drive game, it also features some stunning driving stages courtesy of Malibu Entertainment. Ridiculously action-packed and putting to shame many other 16-bit racers, it adds massively to the overall experience and is an unmissable Mega-CD game.



AMIGA: ■ This was a rare misfire from Denton Designs, creator of *The Great Escape*, *Shadowfire* and *Where Time Stood Still*. The visuals are weedy and uninspired; the level design is bland, while simply leaping from platform to platform is an exercise in frustration. Easily the worst *Batman Returns* game.



NES: ■ A great scrolling fighter from Konami in the vein of *Final Fight*, this lacks a complex move set, and not having a second player is a big oversight, but there's no denying it's a great little game. It's also bolstered by some smart shooting levels.



MEGA DRIVE: ■ Acme Interactive's take on *Batman Returns* took the form of a huge arcade adventure. While it shares a lot of DNA with Ocean's *Batman: The Movie*, it's let down by a high difficulty level and infuriatingly unfair boss fights.



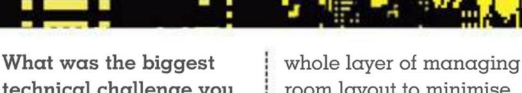
SNES: ■ Konami's second *Batman Returns* game was another scrolling fighter, and the best example to be found on the SNES. Stunning animation, exciting boss encounters and a superb repertoire of moves made this the best use of the *Batman Returns* licence.

1993



BATMAN: THE ANIMATED SERIES

■■■ KONAMI'S SECOND *Batman* game is notable for a number of reasons. It only appeared on the Game Boy, it's the first *Batman* videogame to be based on the popular animated series that ran from 1992 to 1995, and it features some fantastic encounters with some of Batman's most popular foes, including Mr Freeze, The Riddler and Poison Ivy. It's also the very first *Batman* game to feature Robin as a playable character, but only for limited periods. A sprawling action adventure with platform overtones, *Batman: The Animated Series* proved that a humble handheld was more than capable of capturing the brilliance of the TV show.

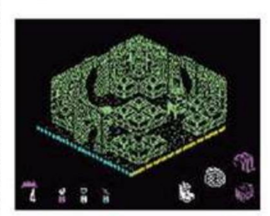


What was the biggest technical challenge you faced in development?
Making the isometric system work. When I started I had no idea at all how it had been done and it took a while to work out a system. Once I had the basic idea, there was another whole layer of managing room layout to minimise the memory footprint to allow maximum space for graphics. When the game was finished I had a tiny amount of RAM left (14 bytes if I remember correctly) and I managed to add Batman tapping his foot in that space.

Why doesn't Robin feature as a character in the game?
I couldn't really work out what to do with him at the time. We had a vague idea that we might have him showing up now and then – and then vanishing again – but it never happened.

How important was *Batman*'s development to the eventual success of *Head Over Heels*?
Hugely, I think. First, I had the majority of the engine, and then the whole success of *Batman* meant *Head Over Heels* was looked at with some anticipation.

Were you ever tempted to make a Batman sequel?
No.





ROGUES GALLERY

The greatest in-game appearances from Batman's greatest foes

THE PENGUIN Batman Returns
■ Flying around the screen and pummelling you with exploding umbrellas, he's a nightmare to defeat, even when playing on easy.



POISON IVY The Adventures Of Batman And Robin
■ Ivy takes a back seat and sets a huge piranha plant on Batman that takes a huge amount of punishment.



THE RIDDLER The Adventures Of Batman & Robin
■ Like Ivy, The Riddler doesn't take on Batman mano-a-mano. On SNES he dumps you in a maze, with its very own minotaur. Then he transports you to an alternate universe and attacks you with chess pieces.



MR FREEZE The Adventures Of Batman & Robin
■ Encased in a seemingly impervious shell, you must whittle away at it while avoiding Freeze's mechanical helpers. He puts up quite a fight.



THE JOKER The Adventures Of Batman & Robin
■ The Joker has appeared in more *Batman* games than any other villain.While the rollercoaster fight on the SNES version of *The Adventures Of Batman And Robin* is a highlight, the Mega Drive outing where he's in a huge air balloon is far more challenging.

HARLEY QUINN The Adventures Of Batman & Robin
■ Beating Harley down in her jetpack, she soon comes back with a giant sprite-scaled crane that proves a real chore to avoid. Take her down and she flails her hands and fists like a baby.



TWO-FACE The Adventures Of Batman & Robin
■ You don't actually fight Two-Face in the Mega Drive outing; he taunts you from a blimp as he throws explosives. Taking his blimp out causes the entire structure you're on to collapse, so be careful.

THE SCARECROW The Adventures Of Batman & Robin
■ After a dangerous crossing on The Scarecrow's blimp, the pair face off in an impressive mode-7 battle atop Scarecrow's getaway plane. Very impressive.



CATWOMAN Batman Returns
■ Residing at the end of the third level, Catwoman is a real pain. Her fast rush attack and long whip do a good job at keeping Batman at bay. Otherwise she swings at you and gives you a good kicking with her stilettos.



THE ADVENTURES OF BATMAN & ROBIN

■■■ ANOTHER *BATMAN* licence, and another example of separate publishers creating their own distinct games. The SNES offering was developed by Konami, a fun single-player scrolling fighter/platformer with excellent graphics and animation but very little input from Robin. It's a great game, with numerous set-pieces (including a jaw-dropping Mode 7 battle with the Joker), but it fails to compare to the excellent Mega Drive game.

Unlike Konami's effort, it's a fast-paced *Gunstar Heroes* clone with two-player play, even better animation, and a notoriously hard difficulty level. It primarily focuses on Mr Freeze as its main villain, but also includes memorable face-offs against the Mad Hatter, Harley Quinn and The Joker.

The Mega-CD offering is effectively a driving game with Batman racing through the streets of Gotham. The quality of the effects is sensational, with some of the best examples of sprite-scaling to be found on any 16-bit game. Regardless of which one you settle for, they represent some of the best Batman action to be found in 2D form.

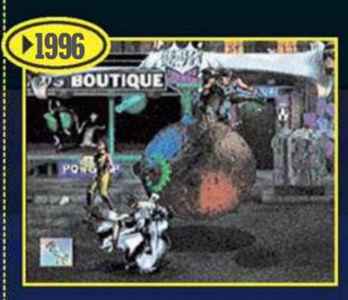






BATMAN FOREVER

■■■ THIS DISAPPOINTING effort from Probe was inspired by the digitised visuals of *Mortal Kombat*. As a result the sprites look ugly, and suffer from stilted, jerky gameplay, and the Mega Drive/SNES version is best avoided. The Game Boy offering is even worse with ugly visuals, awkward, stiff gameplay and very stodgy controls.



BATMAN FOREVER: THE ARCADE GAME

■■■ WHILE IT'S not a patch on the scrolling fighters offered by Konami or Capcom, Iguana Entertainment's take on *Batman Forever* was far better than Acclaim's 16-bit offerings. While the graphics are slicker than the 16-bit games, animation is weak. Fortunately, the gameplay is a lot of fun, with OTT combos and fast-paced combat. It's notable for being the first Batman game to be released on 32-bit consoles.



THE OCEAN CONNECTION

Gary Bracey discusses The Caped Crusader and Batman: The Movie

■ **WHY WAS the decision made to take *Batman: The Caped Crusader* in such a different direction to Jon Ritman's game?**
We had the licence and were riding on the back of Jon's successful game, so the thought was to exploit that. There simply wasn't time to design and develop a new isometric game… Not to mention the fact that Jon was already in development of *Head Over Heels*.

Who came up with the different scenarios for *Batman: The Movie*?
The design was a collective process so each member of the team had an element of the creative input. This would account for the diversity of gameplay.

Who suggested the comic panels found in *The Caped Crusader*?
I think that was Canvas, the developer. To be honest, I didn't have a lot to do with that project. I think David Ward took Canvas under his wing and gave them a brief to make a *Batman* game, and they came back with the adventure concept.

How did the *Batman* games perform against

1998



BATMAN & ROBIN

■■■ BATMAN'S TRANSITION to 3D was not smooth, with titles pre-*Arkham Asylum* suffering from bad cameras, slow gameplay and dull combat. *Batman & Robin* lets you play as Batgirl and offers a *GTA sandbox*, but is let down by unresponsive driving, muddy visuals and uninspired gameplay.

2001



BATMAN: CHAOS IN GOTHAM

■■■ RELEASED EXCLUSIVELY on Game Boy Color, *Chaos In Gotham* saw Batman facing off against numerous villains after they escape from *Arkham Asylum*. It's one of Ubisoft's better offerings, but it hasn't got the pace or variety of early Game Boy *Batman* titles.

2000



BATMAN BEYOND: RETURN OF THE JOKER

■■■ RELEASED TO tie in with the animated film of the same name, *Batman Beyond* was another dire scrolling fighter for the N64 and PlayStation. The Game Boy offering is a little better, but it's still an average effort that can't come anywhere near the majesty of *Batman Returns* on the Super Nintendo.

2001



BATMAN: GOTHAM CITY RACER

■■■ AVAILABLE EXCLUSIVELY on PlayStation, *Gotham City Racer* was based on *The New Batman Adventures* cartoon. Unfortunately, the quality of the series didn't rub off on Ubisoft, as *Gotham City Racer* was a dull racing game that managed to make Gotham as memorable as a traffic jam on the M4 in the rain.

■ This isn't the end of Batman's digital adventures but it's certainly the end as far as his retro outings are concerned. Batman's videogame stories have been varied, but unlike many other superhero series, the thought of a new *Batman* game doesn't fill gamers with revulsion. It'll be interesting to see if Rocksteady can continue to capture the heady days of Batman's 8 and 16-bit years in generations to come.

THE FURTHER ADVENTURES OF BATMAN

A brief guide to the more recent adventures of the Dark Knight

BATMAN VENGEANCE

Released: **2001**



■ The home console versions are rather average third-person adventures, but the GBA outing is by far worse, with bland animation and clunky controls.

BATMAN: DARK TOMORROW

Released: **2003**



■ A terrible effort that was stuck in development hell for four years. It's a third-person adventure with an appalling camera and atrocious AI.

BATMAN: JUSTICE UNBALANCED

Released: **2003**



■ An educational game consisting of five different games created primarily for young children. While the gameplay is lacking, it does feature fun cut-scenes.

BATMAN: TOXIC CHILL

Released: **2003**



■ Another educational offering from The Learning Company, this time focusing on Batman's attempts to capture Mr Freeze and The Riddler. It again features five different puzzle games.

BATMAN: RISE OF SIN TZU

Year Released: **2003**



■ A dull scrolling fighter from Ubisoft Montreal that had none of the charm or varied moves that Konami's earlier efforts offered.

BATMAN BEGINS

Released: **2005**



■ While Eurocom's take on *Batman* features some nice mechanics like manipulating the environment to scare enemies, it's a fairly average *Splinter Cell* clone at its core.

LEGO BATMAN: THE VIDEO GAME

Released: **2008**



■ It sticks rather rigidly to the tried-and-tested *Lego* template, but this is still a fun adventure from Traveller's Tales with a great two-player mode.

BATMAN: ARKHAM ASYLUM

Released: **2009**



■ It runs out of steam about two-thirds of the way through, but this was a stunning outing for the Dark Knight that proved he could operate in a 3D world.

BATMAN: THE BRAVE AND THE BOLD

Released: **2010**



■ While the animation is excellent, the gameplay is rather basic and primarily geared towards younger players. The Wii version features co-op play, while the DS outing is single-player.

BATMAN: ARKHAM CITY

Released: **2011**



■ Impressive follow up to *Arkham Asylum* that featured far more variation, better boss encounters and great characterisation. Raised the bar for comic-based games.

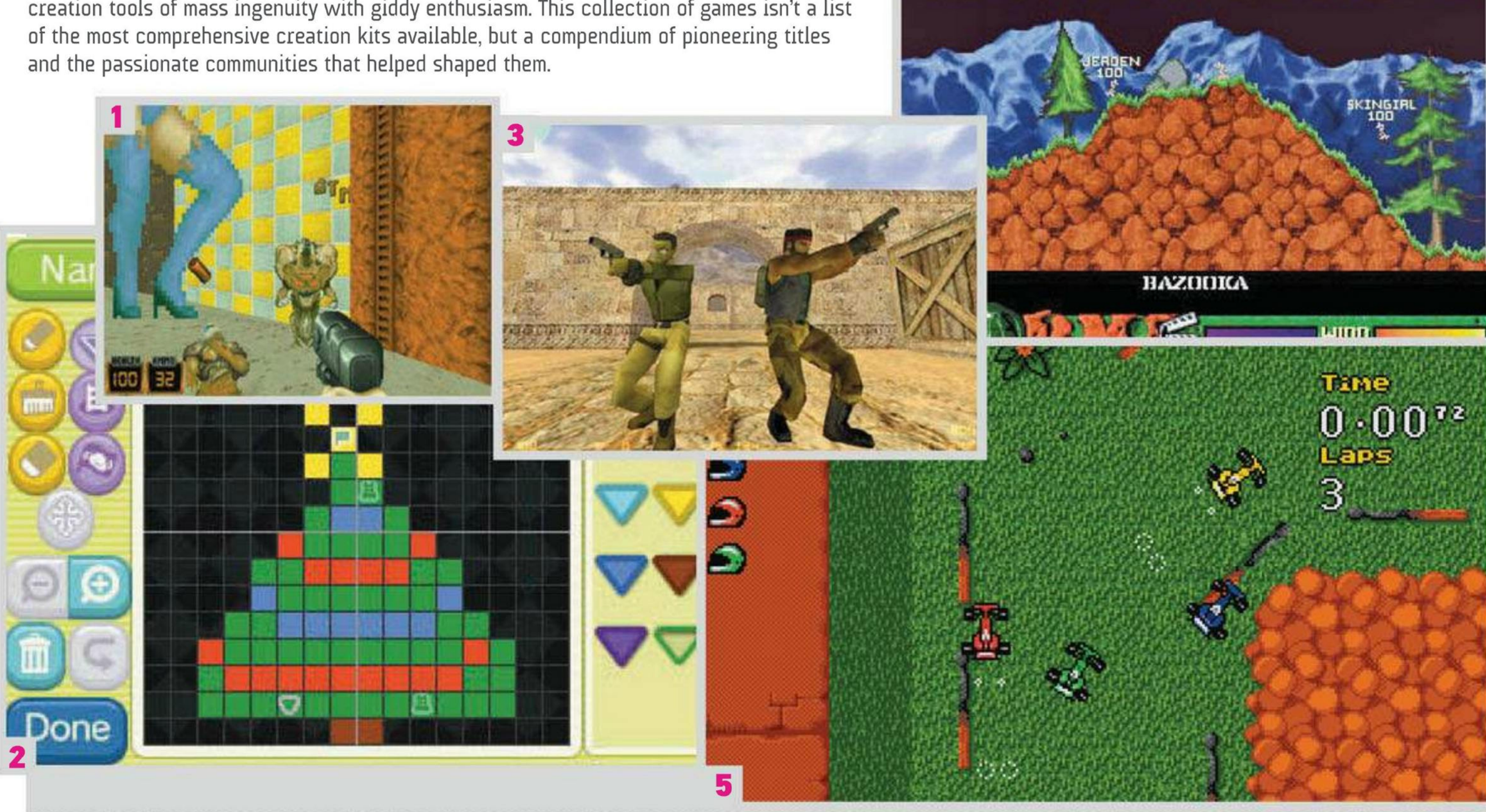
other film/TV licences?
The first *Batman* game was a smash hit… the licence certainly helped, but I do believe it was the game that made it the success it was. *The Caped Crusader* did so-so, mainly because adventure games were falling a little out of favour by then. However, the giant hit was *The Movie* game. In fact, Commodore credited a large part of the Amiga's success to the Batman Pack. If I do say so myself, it was a great game; beautifully designed and developed by our incredibly talented team of programmers, artists and musicians.

And why was the decision made to make the car/plane sections two-dimensional for the 8-bit versions?
Because we couldn't do justice to a 3D version and make it look good and play well. Obviously it was discussed, but unlike many other developers we always tried to maximise the performance of each individual platform. Therefore, if the programmer stated that the 3D would run (and look) like a dog then we had to investigate alternative implementations. Obviously the 8-bit sections of the Batmobile/plane weren't as good as the 16-bit ones, but they were a hell of a lot better than a straight 3D conversion would have been.

ESSENTIALS

10 OF THE BEST GAMES WITH MODDING OPPORTUNITIES

■ User-generated content has graduated in recent years from a finicky niche pastime to an alluring mainstream marketing tool for publishers to slap on the back of a plastic box. But even before the likes of *LittleBigPlanet* or *Trials Evolution* opened the floodgates of abstract expression to the layman, communities had embraced track editors, modding kits and other creation tools of mass ingenuity with giddy enthusiasm. This collection of games isn't a list of the most comprehensive creation kits available, but a compendium of pioneering titles and the passionate communities that helped shaped them.



Duke Nukem 3D
Year: 1996
Format: PC

1 3D Realms' third outing for the muscle-minded *Duke* series has earned its fair share of plaudits and detractors through a particularly pungent cocktail of brazen misogyny, catchphrase pilfering and a total disregard for subtlety. Yet few recall the pioneering level editor bundled with the shooter, fronted by an intuitive DOS-based interface that enabled even casual *Duke*-loving knuckleheads to have a fair crack at creating fresh stages. At a time when *Doom* purists fumbled incessantly with complicated custom software, 3D Realms' Build engine invited ingenuity with simple box dragging and a wide selection of button inputs. Hail to the king, indeed.

Pullblox
Year: 2011
Format: 3DS

2 Nintendo's collection of 250-odd perspective-based puzzles continues to subvert expectations long after you've wrapped your thinking box around the packaged levels. Aside from the elegant interface of Pullblox Studio – effortlessly fuelling pocket-sized design whims – it's the inventive means by which content is shared with other players that both typifies Nintendo's backwards attitude to online functionality and illustrates its continued ingenuity in navigating around it. QR codes are something of a pointless fad in most cases, but here they're used to share levels across the internet, snapping published QR images with your 3DS camera to add new stages to your game.

Counter-Strike
Year: 1999
Format: PC

3 The fact that *Counter-Strike* began life as a *Half-Life* mod speaks volumes on Valve's genial attitude towards its zealous community. Frankly, designing a map is something of a semi-profession in itself, but the way in which the game has blossomed – integrating user-created stages into regular map rotations – has had sweeping influences on the entire industry. Suffice to say, modes such as Gun Game and Zombies have cropped up elsewhere since. Basically, *Counter-Strike* has transformed the first-person shooter into a genre designed by its community.

Worms
Year: 1995
Format: Amiga, PC, Mac

4 It wouldn't be until *Worms 2* that those war-hardened invertebrates received a full-blown level editor, but it was the original Amiga release (and latterly *The Director's Cut*) that first gave pause to blowing the shit out of cheese-like landscapes for a few minutes to tinker around with content creation. While the original enabled players to make slight adjustments through Deluxe Paint, it was Graffiti mode in *The Director's Cut* that promoted unbridled creativity, with crude drawings transformed into floating battlegrounds. Do you want to fight atop a giant penis floating in Hell? Well, if the year's 1997 and you're 14 years old then the answer is likely 'Yes!'

Micro Machines Turbo Tournament '96
Year: 1995 **Format:** Mega Drive

5 While it is physically impossible to surpass the design ingenuity of the toilet seat track within Supersonic's update of *Micro Machines 2*, at least the developer gave petrolheads the opportunity to take a punt. While a modest tabletop canvas kept many more ambitious ideas in check, the enhanced edition of the sequel can claim to be something of a pioneer for simple content creation, packing enough versatility to make track building distinctive enough across multiple attempts.



Smash Bros. Brawl
Year: 2009
Format: Wii

6 *Smash Bros.* may have falcon-punched the genre with a mix of subversion and iconic mascots, but it's 2007's Wii sequel that kicks it up a notch in the innovation stakes. Mostly disregarded by the fanbase, the hidden treat in *Brawl*'s line-up isn't sodden Wolf O' Donnell but the impressive level editor. After the dust had settled following the customary tidal wave of stage clones, originality took precedence with multi-tiered arenas and precarious floating platforms – the right custom stage had every potential of changing the ebb of any face-off. Perhaps best of all, it enabled canny inventors to replicate some of the series' better omitted stages – welcome back Hyrule Castle!

Lode Runner
Year: 1983
Format: Apple II

7 *Lode Runner* was set in the future – not that you'd know it from the pallid bricks-n-ladders level design. Yet its prophetic abilities proved surprisingly precise in its pioneering level editor. Not only was it as simple to grasp as the game's central conceit, but it also became a decisive marketing tool and the driving force behind the game's popularity. Competitions ran in publications such as *Computer Gaming World*, contributing to a boost in sales and kick-starting the first content creation community of its kind.

Far Cry 2
Year: 2008
Format: PC

8 Implementing a map editor into a shooter was a bit old hat in the PC marketplace by the time *Far Cry 2* came along, but that wasn't the case with consoles. Yes, it's simple to use, and yes, it pretty much made every in-game object available. But what it also did was enable players to craft *anything* like some sort of malaria-stricken *Minecraft*. And we mean anything: we've seen Eiffel Towers, rollercoasters and grandiose cathedrals populate online servers, all meticulously crafted from the ground up. There's little doubt that it raised the bar for content creation across the board… we just wish someone had noticed.

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
Year: 2011
Format: PC

9 It's hard to believe that a Macho Man Randy Savage mod was how Bethesda anticipated the community embracing *Skyrim*'s Creation Kit. Fans didn't just expand the breathtaking vistas of Skyrim, or populate it with bygone characters from previous instalments, but instead things went all a bit silly. Endless cheese rolling, *My Little Pony* dragons and Dr. Zoidberg mudcrabs represent just a few of hundreds of incredibly puerile, deranged and brilliant mods currently doing the rounds on the internet. Who needs dour fantasy when you can have the ever-indifferent Karl Pilkington accompanying your hero on a quest? Yeah, that happened…

Bangai-O Spirits
Year: 2007
Format: DS

10 There aren't exactly a wealth of features crammed inside *Bangai-o*'s DS editing tools. However, the way in which the content is shared across devices is eccentric enough to warrant acknowledgement. Inspired by clumsy datacassettes used with old computers, user-created levels are then encoded into a sound that can played into other Nintendo DS consoles to share creations. Not only does it emit a noise resembling a broken 56k modem connecting but it also makes the whole process of content sharing pig-headedly impractical.

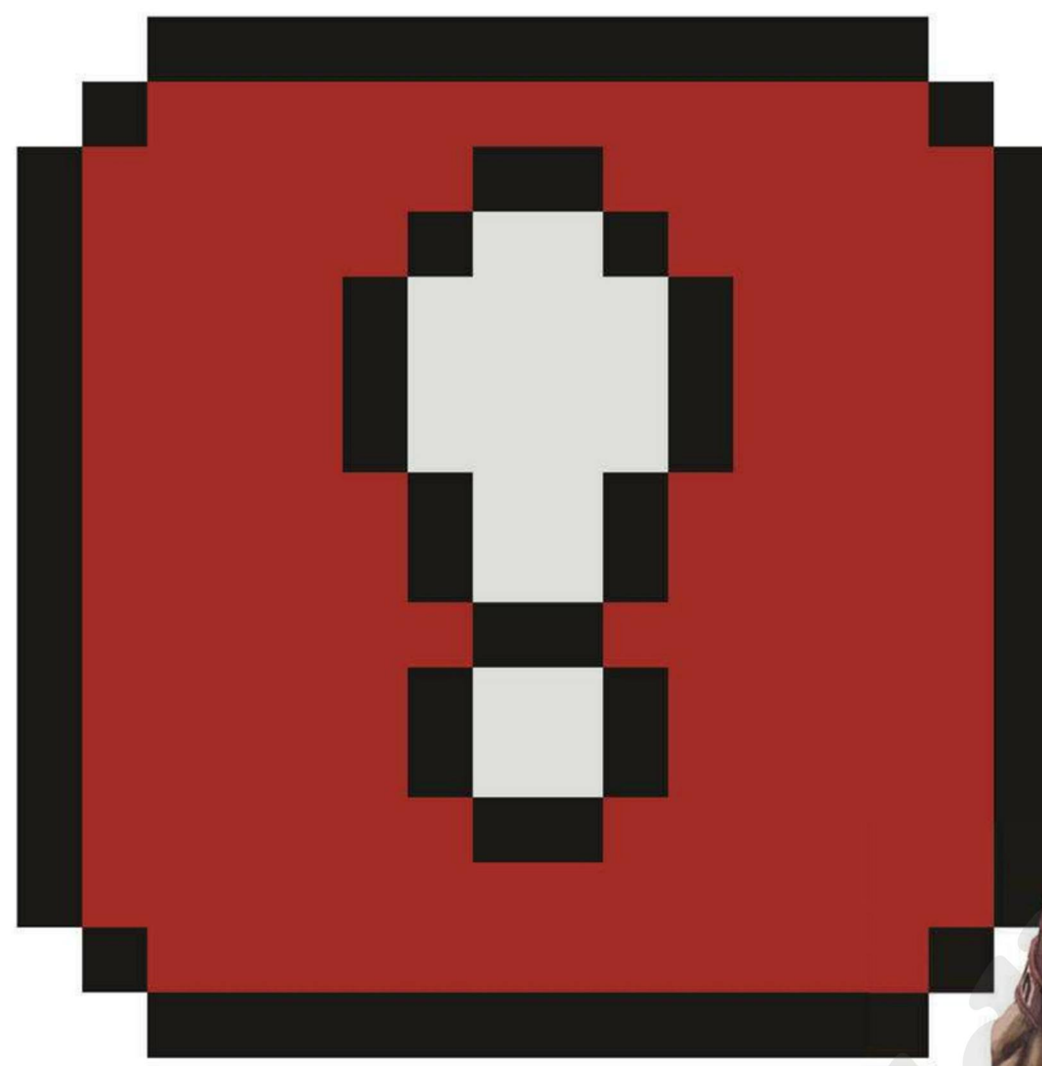


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LOOKING BEYOND THE GAMES AT THE INNER WORKINGS OF THE BUSINESS

FORTUNES TAKE A U-TURN



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TROUBLE FOR NINTENDO?

>> Japanese games giant announces its first financial loss in 30 years

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A Moment With… RedBreast Studio

>> We talk to the indie developer behind *Elite*-inspired space game *Rogue Star*.

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A Moment With… Capcom

>> A quick chat with the *Street Fighter X Tekken* team about the beat-'em-up's future.







WHAT DOES NINTENDO'S FIRST ANNUAL LOSS ACTUALLY MEAN?

*After the disappointing launch of 3DS and the deceleration of Wii sales, the Japanese games giant has reported its first annual loss. **games™** investigates what effect this will have on the company's year ahead*

NINTENDO'S FORTUNES had to change some time. Following a thriving few years where the Japanese company dominated both the home and mobile gaming marketplace – the Nintendo DS steadily expanding its user-base and Nintendo's innovative Wii console ensnaring a whole new untapped consumer demographic – Nintendo reported its first annual loss after a combination of the 3DS's subdued launch, slow Wii sales and a strong yen hit revenues.

The company reported a net loss of ¥43.2bn ($533m/£329m) for the year, just marginally worse than the predicted ¥41.4bn loss. It's quite a significant financial underperformance compared with net income of ¥77.6bn the year before.

Nintendo has had a difficult year after 3DS was met with a relatively muted response following a launch line-up short on solid first-party support. While the portable console's outlook improved months later as *Mario Kart 7* and *Super Mario 3D Land* ignited consumer interest, Wii sales still waned on the back of poor third-party support and a lack of a new killer app to build upon the work of *Wii Sports* and *Wii Fit*.

Analysts are blaming a shift in the way that players are consuming games, with tablets and mobile devices becoming the dominant gaming devices across a broader demographic. A report released this month on mobile gaming site MocoSpace helped substantiate such claims, polling 15,000 gamers about where they play games; 53 per cent said they played in bed, 41 per cent in the living room, 72 per cent commuting and a disturbing 5 per cent on the toilet.

"THEY HAVE been beaten by smartphones and tablets, in particular, for consumers spending and, more importantly, time," said David Gibson, an analyst for Macquarie in Tokyo. It's hard to disagree when taken into consideration that Nintendo has fallen drastically short of its target sales figures for the year. The company estimated that it would sell 13 million Wii consoles and ended up only selling 9.8 million. The 3DS targeted 16 million sales but fell short, only shifting 13.5 million. And the DS only sold half of its anticipated 11 million units.

The weight of these troubling figures has not gone unnoticed by Satoru Iwata. In a post-earnings report briefing with investors, the president of Nintendo seemed conscious of the mistakes the company has made in the past 12 months and the need to drive sales momentum as a new hardware generation arrives.

"The sales trend of the Nintendo 3DS in the Japanese market has been within my expectation, but the U.S. and European sales trends have not," he admitted to investors. "The start of the year-end sales season was slower than the last few years although the sales did pick up at the year-end, and the sales after the turn of the year did not meet my expectations." He later went on to state, "I am not satisfied with the actual sales of the Nintendo 3DS because the trend since the start of this calendar year has not been good enough."

Nevertheless, Iwata is optimistic about the arrival of Wii U later this year, and expressed the need for the Wii U to satiate consumer demand in a digital age.

Nintendo recently announced that some retail Wii U games may receive a digital download option straight to the console's hard drive. While Iwata marks this as a positive step in Nintendo's future, investors were less confident that it would have a positive impact. One shareholder suggested that downloading large game files would be too time consuming for the majority of Wii U owners – a point that Iwata refuted, stating, "Consumers will be able to use the Wii U effectively by finding convenient times to download software."

BUT A digital horizon certainly doesn't make the company futureproof. Microsoft posted its quarterly revenue for its Xbox division, reporting a 16 per cent drop in revenue and a $229 million operating loss, versus a $210 million profit a year ago. Even with a stronger line-up of titles and continued support of Kinect, just 1.4 million Xbox consoles were sold, down 48 per cent from a year ago. This news, from a company that has perhaps been at the vanguard of digitally distributing console releases, will be less than encouraging for Nintendo.

And times are likely to get tougher. For the Wii U to be deemed a financial success, Nintendo will have to sell the new console for as much as $350 to break even, according to estimates made by Nanako Imazu, an analyst for CLSA in Tokyo. That is $100 more than the Wii sold for in 2006, and would exceed current PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 prices in the US market.

"Nintendo has to deal with the change and let Mario games be played on non-Nintendo devices," said Imazu in his report. "I think it will take at least a couple of years to see that." Other industry experts agree with Imazu, the writing seemingly on the wall for Nintendo as a hardware developer, destined to follow in the footsteps of Nineties rival Sega. "Any drastic strategy shift that would dispatch the Mario brothers into the realm of Android and Apple's iOS operating system would likely require a change at the top of Nintendo," said Macquarie's Gibson. "And that likely won't happen for a couple of years until the Wii U is shown to be a clear failure," he added.

> "Nintendo has to deal with the change and let Mario games be played on non-Nintendo devices"
> Nanako Imazu, Analyst, CLSA Tokyo

It's a blasphemous inference, and one that Nintendo would be quick to dismiss. In fact, Iwata is confident that the next 12 months will rectify the mistakes of the last year. For one, Nintendo has the edge on its rivals Sony and Microsoft, launching the next generation with some significant mileage ahead of PlayStation 4 or Xbox 720's eventual release.

Iwata is also quick to address the faults of the Wii, citing a need for stronger third-party support and a wider selection of games for a larger number of consumers.

"There are issues to overcome," Iwata announced to investors. "For example, the Wii was able to reach a large number of new consumers who had never played games before by bringing hands-on experiences with *Wii Sports* and *Wii Fit*. However, we could not adequately create the situation that such new consumers played games frequently or for long, consistent periods. As a result, we could not sustain a good level of profit. Regrettably, what we prioritised in order to reach out to the new audience was a bit too far from what we prioritised for those who play games as their hobby."

Understanding the need to balance multiple consumer demands and provide constant support with first and third-party software will prove telling in Nintendo's next year of operation – not just in terms of whether the company can change its fortune, but also how its attitude will have to adapt to an industry that hardware manufacturers, retailers and publishers are all struggling to understand. Only time will tell whether Mario can end up back on top.

A NUMBERS GAME

■ ONE OF the most surprising statistics released alongside Nintendo's annual earnings report is the first year sales figures of the 3DS in the US, compared with the first year sales of Nintendo's previous two hardware products. Outselling the DS comfortably in the months since release, the 3DS even manages to close in on the Wii's staggering numbers. If the 3DS can sustain this momentum (similar to the DS) and if the Wii U launch is successful, Nintendo may find itself in a more comfortable financial position twelve months from now.




Satoru Iwata, **Nintendo**

■ Iwata disclosed to investors that Nintendo's future plans include expanding into the digital distribution of upcoming Wii U retail releases.

■ Nintendo is relying on the Wii U to boost sales and restore balance to Nintendo's finances.



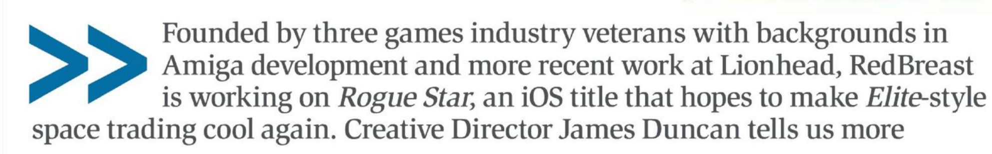


A MOMENT WITH…

RedBreast Studios

KEY FIGUREHEADS

- James Duncan
- Mark Stacey
- Dennis Gustersson



>> Founded by three games industry veterans with backgrounds in Amiga development and more recent work at Lionhead, RedBreast is working on *Rogue Star*, an iOS title that hopes to make *Elite*-style space trading cool again. Creative Director James Duncan tells us more



JAMES DUNCAN

You're new to the App market, having just come from Lionhead. How are you finding it?

>> The market is such that it's like a gold rush, really. It's a great thing on one hand that you have iOS available to you. It's like the BBC of its day, really, where it allows people, who wouldn't normally have the opportunity, to do anything, because it has such reach you can put it in lots of peoples' hands. But of course, then you'll have to stand out in order to reach those people.

So that's what we're aiming to do now with this – and we're doing the stuff of dreams, really, because I've wanted to do this for twenty years. One way or another I've been plugging it to people, but it's a difficult genre to get past producers and all these sort of people. It's not an FPS, it's not a racing game, but I think it's got a lot of legs.

The visual style is striking. How did you come up with it?

>> The graphical style we're going with is… I don't want to say retro, because that conjures up images of pixels. But I loved all these old sci-fi book covers by Peter Elson and Chris Foss in the Seventies and Eighties. That to me is science fiction. It's not the grimy, gritty *Gears Of War* kind of ethic. Even *Star Wars*, to a certain extent. I want to hit something original from a different direction here. It's more colourful, and doesn't take itself too seriously. Lighthearted, but with serious moments; we're trying to strike a blend between the two.



You've compared it to *Elite*, but how exactly will it play?

>> It's first-person. You're looking through the cockpit. A lot of people have asked me, 'Is there going to be a cockpit and stuff?' and to be honest, whenever I play games of this type, whenever there's an option to not have the cockpit, you always end up going with that. We *may* add it in, but when you're looking at what's already a small screen and discerning what's going on… We did a few tests, but we could never really see what was going on.

Space, and sci-fi, is such a great canvas to work in because it can be anything. You always have in your mind what will work or won't work. You'll sometimes think, 'Oh, that wouldn't work in the future,' but other times you'll have bizarre creations that have a strong industrial design, and that's something we want to adhere to. There's some weird and wonderful stuff, but it still has to be seated more or less in reality.

Rogue Star is set in a condensed system where you can fight and trade. As we can't offer a whole galaxy for people to roam around in, we need to keep it manageable. We're only a few people.

It's planned for iPhone right now, but how about iPad? Android?

>> We'd like it to work in iPad, but that brings on a raft of issues. We're starting on iPhone, and then we'll see if we can get it on iPad, and then we'll see how it goes. It would especially look great on the new iPad.

How have you approached the story writing process?

>> We don't want to go too overblown and epic. I want to make a lot of how you deliver story to people to allow them to use their imaginations. Things like *Elite* or *Star Wars* feed your imagination. So rather than nowadays, where you get shown some huge cut-scene that cost $16 million dollars to do, some of that can just be achieved with a few lines by just hinting at what's going on there. *Elite* did that very well by including the novella. It was a very rich way of doing things. Imagine if you went somewhere, shot a ship, then several days down the line you'll hear that you did that, and that could nudge the market in a particular area, and that could have implications later on. There's a huge story going on around you, but how you get there can change.

How has your past at Lionhead helped you move over to mobile?

>> It informs everything, really; it's priceless. It brings a level of realism – doing this kind of thing without that realistic edge, I could think up a million things to do, but I know I wouldn't be able to do them. We have to put out a piece of software here, and we're aware of that.

How has the creative process been on iOS in comparison?

>> It's been challenging working on something that was never effectively supposed to be a games machine. But it's been fantastically rewarding. When you're in a big company, you feel like you have less and less impact on games. And you do. So doing something like this, you feel alive again. When I was doing *Die Hard,* I was able to do all the backgrounds and models; I didn't have such a specialised and condensed role. I could also have an affect on the gameplay.

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Kenzo Tsujimoto
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ACQUISITIONS


>> Final Fight [1989]


>> Resident Evil [1996]


>> Devil May Cry [2001]


>> Street Fighter IV [2009]

>> An industry giant, Capcom is dedicated to innovating and reinventing across a multitude of platforms, genres and licences. Chatting to gamesTM about *Street Fighter X Tekken*, producer Tamoaki Ayano addresses online complaints and the intricacies of producing another complex brawler


TAMAOKI AYANO

What has been your post-launch aim for *Street Fighter X Tekken* since joining Capcom as a producer?

>> As the new producer of *Street Fighter X Tekken*, I've taken over from Ono-san, and I feel like it's now my purpose at Capcom to spread fighting games and spread *Street Fighter X Tekken* to as many platforms as possible. So although we're only working on the Vita version right now, if I ever got the order from the higher-ups to make a 3DS version or an iPad version I would be ready and very happy to do that. It really comes down to the opportunities that we get, but we're definitely open to making the game on other platforms.



Was the inclusion of infinite combos an intentional decision or a genuine mistake?

>> Infinite combos were a complete mistake on the development side. We have people playing the game daily; we have our team trying to find these infinite combos before the game gets released, and we did actually find a whole bunch of infinite combos during our testing phase. But, obviously, when the game gets released and tens of thousands of people start playing at the same time they're going to be able to find things that we missed. A lot of the infinite combos were character-specific or required very strict timing, so while we do extensively test our games to try and find as many issues as we can it is really difficult to find all of the infinite combos that are in the game. So gameplay balance is a really tricky thing and we do our best. We're definitely aware of the ones that are out there now, and we're working behind the scenes to fix them and get a patch out as soon as possible.

Did the free patches act as an apology to players for the online-related complaints?

>> Basically, with *Street Fighter X Tekken* we always had the plan to provide users with both free and paid content. That was always the plan from the beginning. In terms of continuous support, we're aware of the online sound issues and infinite combos. These are things that we feel should be taken care of. But in terms of giving users free gems and replay analysers, things like that, we don't see it as an apology really. It's more like we want to show them that we're committed to supporting *Street Fighter X Tekken* in the long term.

Do console fighting games suffer by not going through a location test like arcade games do?

>> I wouldn't say that the game suffered because we didn't do a location test. The fact that we made it for consoles actually means that we got the game into the hands of players through special events a lot sooner than we would have done with an arcade game. So we've been taking *Street Fighter X Tekken* all over the world, to all sorts of events, for a good year or two, so if you add up all the people who have played the game over time it's probably more than a traditional location test actually. So, although I do think that location tests do help, it's going to be different no matter what when the game finally goes online and you get tens of thousands of people playing it.

What do you personally hope to see in Namco Bandai's *Tekken X Street Fighter*?

>> You know, we always keep close contact with Namco Bandai's Harada-san, who's in charge of the *Tekken X Street Fighter* project. He's actually always joking that it will take until 2018 before that game comes out, so they have a long way to go in the development process. Just judging by that, I really want to see what they'll do with Ryu's hadoken. After six years of development it better look really good or I'll be disappointed.

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WARHAMMER ONLINE
WRATH OF HEROES
EA continues to dominate the MMO marketplace with its latest free-to-play adventure

■ Clearly the go-to character for players called Ur_mum_lol278, this huge orc will hit hard, but offer little in the way of intricacy or grace – all the calling cards of a shrieking 12-year-old boy, and excellent fodder for some easy XP hunting, thankfully.

Warhammer Online: Wrath Of Heroes

A QUALITY SLICE OF MMO FOR THOSE WHO LACK THE TIME, INCLINATION OR BUDGET

It would be unfair to accuse EA of spreading its MMO sandwich filler a little thinly, though it's hard to deny that the publisher seeks to have an answer for everything when trying to unseat Blizzard's *World Of Warcraft*, as well as anything the likes of Jagex or Facebook companies are offering up free of charge.

So while *Star Wars: The Old Republic* continues to enthuse, bore or even hugely offend the general populace, it plugs the gap in the subscription-based, triple-A model. Meanwhile, *Warhammer Online: Age Of Reckoning* has a freeplay scene to rival the cheaper end of *WOW* and some of its microtransaction-based rivals.

But the bargain bucket end of EA's market is now to be occupied by another Games Workshop offshoot: *Warhammer Online: Wrath Of Heroes*. And game producer Carrie Gouskos has absolutely no qualms in extolling the MMO's virtues in just this way, as she sits down exclusively with **games™** to explain more about the thinking behind the pared-down 6v6v6 gameplay of the bite-sized adventure which went into beta several weeks back.

INFORMATION

FORMAT: PC
PUBLISHER: EA
DEVELOPER: BioWare Mythic
ORIGIN: US
RELEASE: 2012 (currently in beta)



"There are a lot of things about the game industry that are changing in many ways," says Gouskos, "and there are going to be successful MMOs all the time, but people are changing the way they want to play games. We were getting a lot of feedback from people saying, 'I love this game, but I don't have the time, I don't have the money, I don't have the space in my life anymore for playing an MMO.' But then we said, 'How do we give them that experience, but in a bite that they can handle? We still have the MMO for the hardcore, but for people who wanted that chunk, it ended up being the perfect balance for them."

GOUSKOS IS KEEN to point out that the tightened focus on play that rewards in short bursts has had effects on gameplay. "We took the abilities [per character] down to five," she confirms. "One thing I think people like about MMOs is they spend hours and hours and hours getting all these abilities, and then min-maxing which ones they use in which order, and which ones they have slotted in this and that, which is a great part of MMOs, but not the part we wanted, because it's still based on investing 700 hours in gameplay. So it was about having that feel, but allowing people to just jump in and understand it."

She continues: "To give it complexity, we have these mastery trees which you can use to level-up and change things, so for example you've got what we call perks. They're exactly like *COD* perks, so if you kill 15 people in a row, and get a kill streak, you turn into a rat ogre and run around smashing people. That kind of thing. We're trying to have a lot of fun with it."

At the same time as fun, and though the tone of play has been altered to take in a widening audience, Gouskos is adamant that the result is still intended to feed into the needs of current hardcore MMO players as well as beginners. The key to pleasing all, she says, is to make sure a community builds up.

"ALMOST ANY GAME out there has a learning curve that is so steep," she



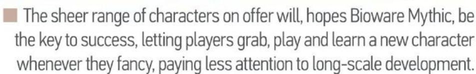
Snot seems to be the magic power of choice in the *Wrath Of Heroes* world right now. Clearly nobody paid heed to those disturbing adverts on the London bus. Just cover up your mouth, alright?

When Brian Boitano was in the alps, fighting grizzly bears, he used his magical fire breath and saved the maidens fair.



"You're going to play this game and get your butt kicked the first five or ten times, but hopefully the experience is fun and compelling"





The sheer range of characters on offer will, hopes Bioware Mythic, be the key to success, letting players grab, play and learn a new character whenever they fancy, paying less attention to long-scale development.

argues. "And it always starts to become about the community – if the community accepts a game, they'll pull them through the learning curve. But yeah, you're going to play this game and get your butt kicked the first five or ten times, but hopefully the experience is fun and compelling enough to make you say, 'Oh, but if I do more, I can get *that*,' and that's what we're hoping."

The real pull for players to return, and what Mythic seems to be resting many of its hopes on, is that *Wrath Of Heroes* offers an atypically larger-than-life selection of heroes to play as. Covering established mythology from the wider series, many characters represent the first ever time characters are playable within the game's canon. "We're using all kinds of heroes you couldn't play in the other games," enthuses Gouskos. "So we've got an ogre, a vampire… it allows us to have much more freedom with play, and not just human characters." So be it rat ogres, giant trolls or good old orcs, every character will come with a loadout of predefined skills, and will encourage short-burst, no-frills drop-in for those with even less time to develop a character from scratch. Mythic intends to keep up its input on this play angle as the game beds in. "If people want more maps, that's fine," says Gouskos, "but we took a poll recently and people said they wanted more heroes, so we've got ten heroes now, and tons and tons more we're working on in the background. And we want it to be fun and kooky. You'll start to fall in love with it."

You can find out for yourself, of course, as the beta continues.

CROSSOVER ATTACK

While connections between *Warhammer Online: Age Of Reckoning* and *Wrath Of Heroes* exist, they're rather more subtle than the character porting or simultaneous play that many had hoped for. Rather, the link is more commercial. On a simple level, those with an *Age Of Reckoning* subscription account will automatically qualify for a 50 per cent item discount in *Wrath Of Heroes*, and various timed promotions also exist beyond this. However, it seems safe to say that *Wrath Of Heroes* is largely aimed at a group of players who *aren't* involved in *Warhammer Online*, so EA is sure to keep reaping those microtransaction benefits in the long run.



THE LATEST DEVELOPMENTS IN THE WORLD OF ONLINE GAMING

GUILD WARS CELEBRATES SEVENTH BIRTHDAY



It's hard to believe, but *Guild Wars* can now start junior school. We hope you joined the celebrations by taking part in carnival games on Shing Jea Boardwalk and racing Rollerbeetles. More importantly, we hope you unlocked the Hound of Balthazar between 24 April and 8 May, because now it'll cost you 100,000 Balthazar Faction. Lorks.

FROGSTER RESPONDS TO COMPLAINTS TO TERA EUROPE CENSORSHIP



Claret-loving *TERA* players got annoyed of late as, in an attempt to secure a PEGI 12+ rating, much of the game's delightful blood and gore has been removed. Frogster has simply responded by saying the 'gore slider' will return at release. Which is obviously the important thing.

SECURITY BREACH AT CHAMPIONS ONLINE DEVELOPER CRYPTIC



Cryptic Studios, of *Champions Online*, *Star Trek Online* and soon of *Neverwinter* fame, has rather belatedly admitted to a successful hack on its user databases back in December 2010. It admits passwords, handles and other user data was stolen, and rather unhelpfully suggests vigilance. For shame.

FINAL FANTASY XIV UPDATES TO V1.22



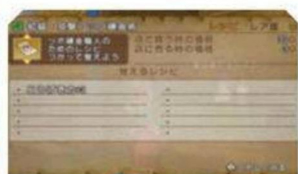
While slighter than the last patch released for Square Enix's relaunched MMO, there's still an important loadout here, with four added ranks for Grand Companies, a new Garuda battle mode, an added item drop facility for crafting and gathering, and a smattering of new quests.





Dragon Quest X might be an MMO, but it's bringing with it the game's usual strikingly cutesy visual motifs. No word on hilarious regional accents yet for a dub, but you can bet it's only a matter of time.





This lamp gives Alchemists the power to enchant weapons. But will you stick with the magic lamp, or go back to hack-and-slash basics with a simple pot?



This roulette game is the way to enchant items as an Alchemist. Levelling up the character's job role will enable the outcome of spins to be influenced in various ways.

Dragon Quest X: Rise Of The Five Tribes

CAN SQUARE ENIX MAKE ONLINE GOLD?

It's not long now till slimes and swords for all the people, as Square Enix has finally announced a release date for *Dragon Quest X*.

While the game's still in beta, it's going to launch on disc (two, actually) at retail on 2 August for ¥6,980 – around £53. It comes with 20 days of free play in the box, which seems a little paltry given the price tag, though the monthly subscription is only ¥1,000 (£7) beyond that, with further discounts for 60 and 90-day deals. It's always a daunting task to launch an MMO; The current financial climate is bad enough, but there's also the growing factor that many companies are shifting to free-to-play models, further poisoning the water hole for such a traditional (one could even say dated) subscription model.

Still, it's apparently working out for EA as *The Old Republic* goes from strength to strength. And let's not forget – this is *Dragon Quest* – a brand that, in Japan at least, needs little to no effort to sell millions to begin with. But for the uninitiated, what has Square Enix got up its sleeve to make this one not just a memorable *Dragon Quest* game, but also a standout MMO?

One interesting new feature is the Alchemy job. Picking up where Blacksmiths leave off in actually making weapons, Alchemists can call on arcane secrets to enchant weapons with by using two sub-types of Alchemy.

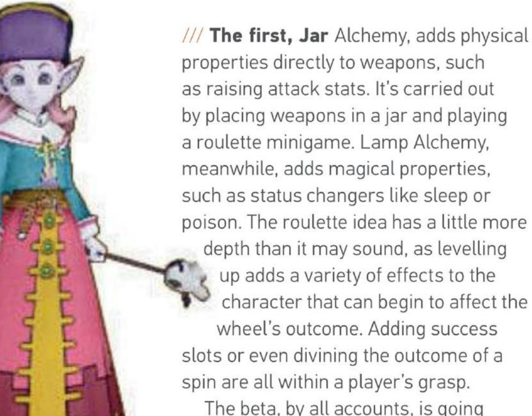
/// **The first, Jar** Alchemy, adds physical properties directly to weapons, such as raising attack stats. It's carried out by placing weapons in a jar and playing a roulette minigame. Lamp Alchemy, meanwhile, adds magical properties, such as status changers like sleep or poison. The roulette idea has a little more depth than it may sound, as levelling up adds a variety of effects to the character that can begin to affect the wheel's outcome. Adding success slots or even divining the outcome of a spin are all within a player's grasp.

The beta, by all accounts, is going well so far, with 17,000 people currently testing in a closed environment. But there's still plenty of technical ground to be made up even after the MMO's release in August, as Nintendo has made the sensible choice of switching development from Wii to Wii U, releasing the game on the new format some months after the new hardware is released.

Details, as with most upcoming projects on Wii U, are still sketchy, but with a trailer for Ubisoft's *Rayman Legends* doing the rounds, it's clear developers are becoming keen to take advantage of the console's utilisation of Near Field technology. There's perceivably an excellent market opportunity for releasing tiny plastic effigies of popular *Dragon Quest* universe characters and items, so if a host of encoded figures become part of the Wii U's particular take on the game, it'll be little surprise. As it stands, the Wii version is already having to make concessions. A 16GB memory card will now be a necessity to get the game to work, which spells a first for the format. Consider it a sign that the usually backward Nintendo is backing the right horse, for once.

INFORMATION

FORMAT: PC
PUBLISHER: Square Enix
DEVELOPER: In-house
ORIGIN: Japan
RELEASE: 2012
PRICE: ¥6,980





GUILD CHAT

The most pertinent questions facing MMO developers today



Justin Beck

CEO and Co-Founder, PerBlue

With Parallel Kingdom just reaching the major milestone of over one million players, the GPS-integrating location-based MMO has continued to go from strength to strength. We talk to CEO Justin Beck about the company's plans moving forward

In some ways, do you feel that it is getting harder or easier for games in the free-to-play space to achieve a large player base?

The competition for attention is fierce in the mobile games space. Our goal is to first get noticed and downloaded, but more importantly maintain a player's interest once the download occurs.

Stats show that two of the top app search terms during recent months were 'free' and 'free games', but roughly one in five free smartphone games are abandoned the first day after downloading, and even fewer games are used after 30 days.

Developers need to take the long view approach and offer experiences that keep players coming back. It's significantly easier to add a millionth user if you haven't lost the previous ones.

> Our goal is to first get noticed and downloaded, but more importantly maintain a player's interest once the download occurs

***Parallel Kingdom* overlays a fantasy world over a GPS view of our real world. How difficult was this to implement in 2008?**

We're proud of the fact that *Parallel Kingdom* was the first massively multiplayer title to use the player's location as a core game feature. We worked hard to create the infrastructure and server system that makes it all work seamlessly. However, the primary focus has always been creating a great game, which takes more diligence and creativity than GPS integration. I'm a believer in location as a game feature rather than a major mechanic.

To what extent is the indie, self-published route still a viable springboard for fledgling developers to achieve success?

The self-published route is still a strong road for developers who have something unique to offer. Many of the big development companies started with one game and built off that success. My advice for other indie developers is to keep your eye on the long view, measure progress and adjust as necessary. PerBlue has grown from a bootstrapping startup, founded while I was in college, to a thriving company with 40 employees.

While it would have been great to have the resources and established brand recognition of a larger game publisher, I wouldn't trade the experience we've gained for anything. I wouldn't hesitate to put our dedication to our players and talent for game creation up against anyone else's.

Would you ever consider console development? What barriers to entry make it difficult for F2P developers to gain a footing in this space?

Console development is not on our immediate horizon. Mobile and online games are going through an explosion of exciting change, and while we enjoy console games, we don't see an immediate need to produce one ourselves.

Console games are largely graphics-driven, and take longer to implement change. We enjoy introducing new game features on a regular basis and the focus on game dynamics rather than the realism of our avatars. *Parallel Kingdom* is in the centre of the action, and we wouldn't change that.

For more information on Parallel Kingdom, see www.parallelkingdom.com







Parallel Kingdom uses your current GPS location to layer a fantasy world over your immediate surroundings.



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